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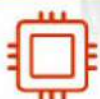
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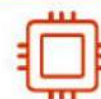
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“A COLOURFUL TRIP BACK TO THE PAST IN OUR TMNT FEATURE”



It's not often you get to put both the Ninja Turtles and Gabe Newell on your cover. Honestly, it was hard to resist putting an eye mask on him.

You can consider this an issue of two halves – a colourful trip back to the past in our TMNT feature, but also a serious look at the future in our hardware section, where we not only talk to the big man himself,

but give our scored verdict on the Steam Deck.

Well, two halves plus a ton of other features, previews, reviews and more, that is. It all adds up to four whole magazines worth of great content, if you ask me.

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR
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SEE p44

The PC Gamer team



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This month
Discovered the joys of delivering dinner via catapult in unique sim *The Wandering Village*.



WES FENLON
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This month
Played the Deck until steam shot out of his ears, but still found time to chat to Gabe Newell.



FRASER BROWN
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This month
Indulged his contrary nature by looking for the good in a hated MMO expansion.



LAUREN MORTON
Twitter
[@ComradeCupcake_](https://twitter.com/ComradeCupcake)

This month
Played 20 hours of *The Sims 3* and never even got a job. Wallpaper patterns come first.

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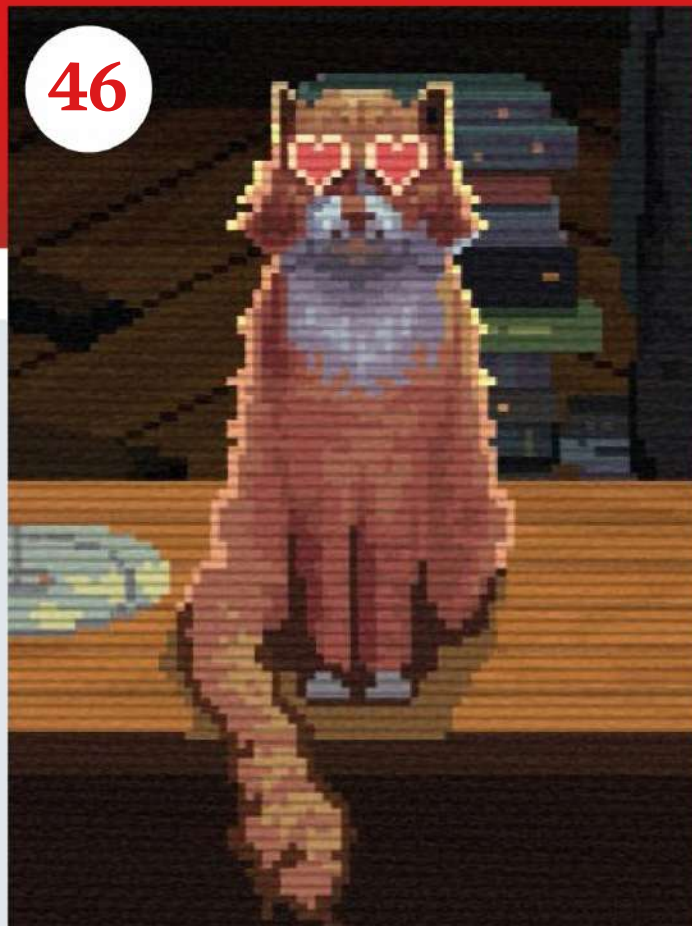
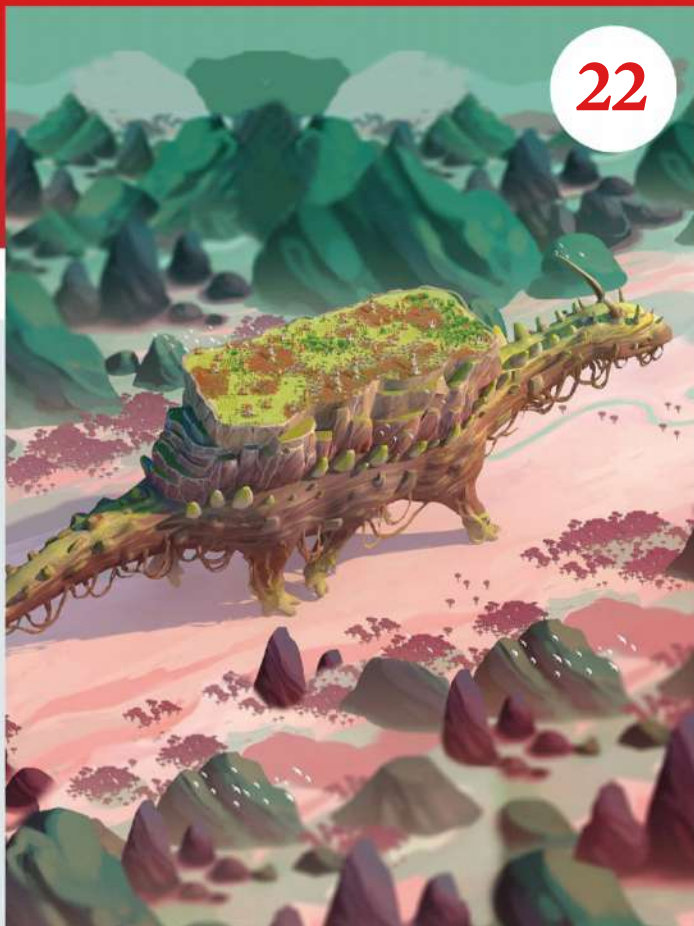
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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



Steam originally
launched in 2003.

STEAM RISING

VALVE's omnipresent platform now has more daily users than the United Kingdom has people

As the magazine was going to press Valve published its Steam statistics for 2021: yes, most companies do this at the start of the year, but it's good to experience a bit of Valve time again, don't you think?

What is astonishing is the scale Steam is operating at, and how quickly users have stacked. The platform now boasts 69 million daily active players, and 132 million unique monthly users. The first number is higher than the population of the United Kingdom (67.89 million) while the second is more people than

live in Mexico (128.9 million) and would make Steam the tenth biggest country on Earth. Er, if it was a country, that is.

Valve's preferred metric for measuring Steam's success has always been highest concurrent player count: in 2015 the peak was 8.4 million; in 2017, 14 million; 2018, 18.5

**THIS WOULD MAKE
STEAM THE TENTH
BIGGEST COUNTRY
ON EARTH**

million; in March 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic began, it went over 23 million. The figure for 2021 is 27.4 million people. Steam's highest concurrent player count has increased by 19 million people in seven years.

Some will not be happy with this: Steam has close to a monopoly on PC distribution and Valve's decisions, whatever they may be, have potentially enormous consequences for developers and customers. Another school of thought is that a de facto standard was always inevitable in PC digital distribution and, if any company's going to be in charge, Valve feels like the least-bad option.

SMALLTIME RETRIBUTION

STREAMERS RETALIATION



Former streamer of PC builders ArtesianBuilds, Kiapiaa, was denied her winnings based on undisclosed terms. After Intel, the company's sponsor, aired its disagreement, CEO, Noah Katz apologised, and she was offered the PC, but she told them where to stick it. ■KW

STOCK HORROR

STREET FIGHT-UHH...



Street Fighter is known for its dynamic visuals, but the logo for *Street Fighter 6* is anything but. Its blandness prompted ridicule from fans and pro fighters across the globe, with eagle-eyed gamers discovering it might actually be an \$80 stock logo from Adobe. ■MT



LOST ARK-COUNTS

BAN TSUNAMI



We've seen games like *Call of Duty: Warzone* ban bots and cheaters in waves reaching over tens of thousands. But *Lost Ark* might have set records this March, with a ban wave giving over one million alleged bot accounts in a single go. If you noticed queue times shorten, this might be the reason why. ■NC



ABOVE: Other services have struggled to challenge Steam's dominance.

DE-STEAMERS

Not that Steam has lacked competitors: even if many went by the wayside. The most obvious and likely contenders now seem the Epic Game Store and, always looming, the gathering power of Microsoft's pull with Game Pass. Epic has thrown around money to developers and free games to consumers, and it's paid off: the store had 194 million PC users in 2021, and its daily active users peaked at 31.1 million. These are far from Steam's numbers, but they're big, and Epic seems in this for the long haul.

In February Bethesda announced the Bethesda launcher would be closing, and players could transfer their games for Steam. This is interesting not because the Bethesda launcher was intended as a Steam competitor – it was simply about Bethesda trying to keep Valve's 30% cut for itself. But even that now, for a company of Bethesda's enormous size, makes less sense than just taking the hit and selling through Steam.

Valve has been important to PC gaming since the '90s, but with Steam's launch in 2003 it put itself at the heart. The simple truth is that, high-end gear aside, it's never been easier or cheaper to game on PC. And as the world becomes PC gamers, and Steam rises with the tide, what does Valve think the landscape should look like?

Rich Stanton

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Genshin energy

Genshin developer MiHoYo invested \$63 million into building a tokamak.

Dream of Californication?

23 years after the Red Hot Chili Peppers did a video featuring a fake open world game for *Californication*... a modder went and made all seven stages of it.

GPU what?

Availability of graphics cards is finally increasing.

Serious Hacks

A hacker group called Lapsus\$ compromised Nvidia and Samsung.

Titanfail

After thousands in funding indie MMO *TitanReach* is dead, with an insider alleging the lead developer used the cash to gamble on crypto.

eSnoop Dogg

Snoop Dogg is now a member of Faze Clan and, yes, he's going to be called Faze Snoop.

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

What's the deal with *Half-Life 3*? No, stop, this isn't the opener for some kind of stand-up routine. The Spy isn't wildly gesticulating and putting undue emphasis on the words 'what' and 'deal' in the attempt to convey the inherent absurdity of an otherwise mundane annoyance for comedic effect. The Spy's brief tour of the open mic circuit was long ago, and The Spy thinks it's rude that you would even bring it up.

Earnestly, then, what is the deal with *Half-Life 3*? Or, more accurately, what's the deal with the internet's reaction to the continued lack of news about *Half-Life 3*? The absence of information used to be a big deal. Even just a few years ago, the comments of completely unrelated gaming news stories would be filled with 'Half-Life 3 confirmed' memes. The anticipation was palpable, as if every moment fizzled with the knowledge that *Half-Life 3* could be announced at any moment.

But then, without warning, it stopped. There was no inciting drama. No memo was circulated. Simultaneously, it seems, everyone just decided to let it go. Our collective innocence died and nothing was ever the same. Even the release of *Half-Life: Alyx* didn't reverse this phenomenon – if anything, it

compounded it. Now the internet spends its days cycling through insincere arguments about difficulty modes, crunch, or whether game engines are just vibes. This is progress, but not necessarily the good kind.

LETTING OFF STEAM

Arguably the biggest contributor to the death of *Half-Life 3* hype was the perception that Valve no longer releases games. This is despite the fact that Valve does sometimes release a game – just weirdly, and with less impact than before. *Half-Life: Alyx* is great, but neutered by being a VR exclusive. *Dota Underlords* is a game that you only remembered when you read its name earlier in this sentence – and will have forgotten by the time you reach DNA Tracing. *Aperture Desk Job* was released without warning, mostly as a Steam Deck tech demo.

But *Aperture Desk Job* is also a chance to root around some Valve code, looking for clues about upcoming games. Dataminer Tyler McVicker did just that, and discovered references to what might be other projects in development at the studio.

McVicker claims that four titles are referred to in the code. Three of them – a follow-up to *Half-Life 3*, a previously cancelled *Portal*-adjacent puzzler called *F-Stop*, and a Source 2 port of *CS:GO* – strike The Spy as especially tenuous. These are a small number of minor references that don't necessarily suggest anything. The fourth – *Citadel* – seems more substantive, although that has little bearing on whether or not it's in active development. *Citadel* has long been rumoured – most often by McVickers himself, who claims it's a team-based RTS/FPS hybrid. Much of the code comments found with *Aperture Desk Job* detail AI interactions and equippable abilities and weapons.

Valve, for its part, issued the following statement in response to a previous McVickers rumour that claimed *Citadel* was being made with Steam Deck in mind, "We think it's important to reiterate that while Tyler is a passionate gamer, he has no inside information about what goes on at Valve." *Half-Life 3* confirmed? Spy out. ■
The Spy

OUR COLLECTIVE INNOCENCE DIED AND NOTHING WAS EVER THE SAME



THE SPY
The Spy has not been officially announced.

This month in... 2012



1 How do you remake one of the most influential multiplayer shooters of all time? For our *CS:GO* cover feature, we asked (now ex-)Valve writer Chet Faliszek, leading to this timeless quote about player feedback, "I once joked you could put 10 dollars in a bag and give it away for free, and someone's going to complain you didn't put 20 in the bag."

ISSUE
239, May 2012
ON THE COVER
Counter-Strike: Global Offensive
IN THE CINEMAS
The Cabin in the Woods

2 In reviews, *Mass Effect 3* (93) and *League of Legends* (85) both feature. But the honour of lead review goes to *Tribes: Ascend*, which scores 88. RIP Tribes.



3 Once every four years, PC Gamer publishes an issue during the Olympics. To our knowledge, only once ever has this occurrence been celebrated by 'The Lolympics' – a ten page event in which the team dresses in their best sports day outfits to compete across categories like 'do a big race in *WoW*', 'build a PC', and 'get the furthest in *QWOP*'.

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Special Report

PC INVESTIGATES



Without *King's Field*, there would be no *Elden Ring*.

FROM THE FIELDS

Fans are still making sequels to FromSoftware's '90s RPG series **KING'S FIELD**

Finding the Eye of Horus and placing it on an altar in *Trismegistus* is an unforgettable event. The entire world fades away before returning as a warped version of itself, cloaked in ominous purple hues. It feels like the kind of trick *Trismegistus* just shouldn't be able to pull off, considering how it was made: as an original adventure built with the 22-year-old *Sword of Moonlight: King's Field Making Tool*, a dungeon crawler construction set released on PC by FromSoftware long before *Dark Souls* or *Elden Ring*.

Building a game with FromSoftware's ancient tools took creator Thomas Eversole "multiple hours out of each day" over six months of toil. The effort shows. Strange monsters await your move on a chess-like floor. Serene pools are replaced with fiery lava. The playable duality only becomes more impressive when you realise that travelling back and forth between these skewed reflections is the only way to make any headway. It's the kind of tricky design FromSoftware would appreciate.

FIELD WORK

These days being made to wander decaying, obtuse worlds bursting with secrets and unforgiving bouts of combat almost surely means you're playing one of

FromSoftware's *Souls* games. Its PlayStation-born *King's Field* series, which began in the '90s, paved the way for FromSoftware's later successes. Their blocky models and short draw distances – forgivable considering the original debuted the same year 16-bit console owners were rushing out to buy *NBA Jam* – gave *King's Field* not only a distinctive look but also an almost symbolic visual language of its very own. Its worlds existed in a dreamlike state somewhere between being perfectly understandable and eternally inscrutable; herbs, chests, and people always immediately recognisable yet never given enough detail to stop our imaginations from eagerly filling in the blanks.

Everything we have collectively come to cherish in *Dark Souls* and now *Elden Ring* can be traced back to these earlier games: they're demanding, stubbornly refuse to give up anything without a fight, aren't afraid to inconvenience anyone playing... and by some arcane magic, that makes them utterly irresistible.

That magic was carefully preserved in the collection of models, textures, settings, and capabilities FromSoftware included in *Sword of Moonlight*, released for Windows in Japan in 2000. The software appropriately seems to have just as many quirks as the series it came from. "The limitations I encountered all seemed to have an alternative to bypass [it]," says Eversole. "*Sword of Moonlight* seemed to have a problem with DirectX hardware acceleration



Knives out

The editor draws its unusual name from the powerful sword first seen in 1994's *King's Field* and then found in some slightly redesigned and renamed form in every game in the modern *Souls* series. Always powerful and difficult to acquire, the striking turquoise blade is sure to help anyone who can survive FromSoftware's harsh landscapes long enough to find it.



FAR LEFT: The program's flexible enough to allow for all sorts of unusual encounters.

LEFT: Normally enemies, these spirits have been repurposed into collectibles.

ROYALLY GOOD *Give these fan-made adventures a try*



DARK DESTINY

With the titular dark destiny hanging in the air and voices haunting his dreams, the protagonist sets off for Melenat.



HEIR OF GRANATYKI

A mysterious darkness sweeps the land in this engrossing and traditional *King's Field* prequel.



RETURN TO MELENAT

An interesting mix of the old with the new keeps this post-*King's Field 3* experience feeling fresh and exciting.



TRISMEGISTUS

This original adventure focuses on puzzles over combat, taking the game-making tool in a whole new direction.

and I kept having to toggle it on and off to successfully preview the map and game and use the map editor."

MOONSTRUCK

Eversole discovered that *Sword of Moonlight's* framerate's would tank depending on how areas were connected. There was, of course, an arcane solution. "If Map 0 led to Map 1, and Map 1 led to Map 2, Map 2 would already be showing some major performance issues, and Map 3 from Map 2 would be completely unplayable, or would crash," he says. But if Map 2 and 3 were connected to Map 0 instead? No problem.

Many fan games made with *Sword of Moonlight*, like *Dark Destiny* and *Heir of Granatyki*, use the software to craft new adventures in old *King's Field* worlds, expanding on their locations and fragmented stories as prequels to key events in the often hazy timeline. Going through them, with their remarkable FMV introduction sequences, surprising twists, and obvious love for the series baked into every hidden room and deadly chest mimic, feels less like a walk in the past than a gift to the future. It is 2022, there are still new *King's Field* games out there waiting to be played, and they've been created by people who understand exactly what it is that makes the series so enthralling.

Even MasterTaffer's *Return to Melenat* – a game that visually echoes the originals so closely it starts you off in the same spot you do in 1995's *King's Field 2* (confusingly released in the US as *King's Field*, since the first game never left Japan) – sparks the imagination. It subtly

rebuilds old areas to show them in a whole new light (and to trip up any seasoned hands who wrongly assume they already know how this is going to play out).

Trismegistus is something of an outlier, with more cerebral challenges and outright puzzles that draw from a very different well. "I am a fan of the *Myst* series as well, and decided to try to make a game like that using *Sword of Moonlight*," Eversole says, because he wanted to try "pushing the limits" of what it could do. The tonal shift still feels completely fitting, shining a spotlight on *King's Field's* quiet mastery of environmental storytelling. Every broken pedestal and torch-lit corridor somehow gives the impression they're steeped in lore, and familiar *King's Field* architecture and enemy models being used in new ways enhances the unsettling feeling that the environment around you is a shattered version of itself.

Games built with *Sword of Moonlight* may look ancient and rudimentary next to *Elden Ring*, but there's a reason fans are still drawn to the engine all these years later. There's a real art to working with its limitations: the surrounding murk is meant to be enveloping as much as it is a trick to mask limited draw distances. The slow pace is a feature, not a bug. Even ankle-biting spiders must be treated with a healthy mix of fear and respect. These keepers of the old ways have given us the opportunity to once more wander through worlds gaming has left behind, with new, undiscovered places to explore before they too fade into legend. ■

Kerry Brunskill

THE SOFTWARE APPROPRIATELY SEEMS TO HAVE JUST AS MANY QUIRKS

Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

YOUNGER SCROLLS

How an *Oblivion* questline birthed a new stealth experience in **ABERMORE**

Look at *Abermore*, the new heist RPG from Four Circle Interactive, and you're likely to see the *Thief* in it – the dumb waiters, and waiters knocked dumb with blunt instruments. But the inspiration came via an intermediary – *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. Its notorious Dark Brotherhood questline was designed by Emil Pagliarulo, a veteran of the *Thief* games who secreted stealth missions into Bethesda's open world.

"The lack of staging and matter-of-factness of the objectives let the player be very broad in their approach, and there was something about that which we really liked," say Dan Pearce and Daniel Scales of Four Circle. "It's a feeling that Tom Francis' excellent *Heat Signature* gave us, too, and that was probably our next most prominent influence. Obviously we had an awareness and some familiarity, but *Thief* is actually an influence we landed on sort of by accident through playing other similar games throughout production."

Four Circle's own experience was in the 2D platforming genre, with the acclaimed *10 Second Ninja X*, which forefronts precision jumping and high-speed attacks. Making a first-person stealth game about planning and execution has, in some ways, been a process of unlearning.

"We decided that the player being able to easily mess up jumping and climbing felt bad," Four Circle says. Being spotted was too severe a consequence, and so in the finished *Abermore*, climbing is simplified. "This put the focus back on where the player wants to go rather than whether they possess the ability to get there."

As it turns out, *10 Second Ninja*'s success had also given Four Circle a misplaced sense of confidence. The

developers felt that conventional wisdom about overscoping – that is, planning a game that's simply too large and ambitious for its team to deliver – didn't apply to them. They were wrong. "We had to rescope a lot," they say. "Even simple games are difficult to make."

As Four Circle realised it would have to cut back on the complexity of *Abermore*'s systems, the studio leaned into 'gaminess' instead – looking to the environmental readability of *Apex Legends* for pointers. "We wanted to make sure the player could walk around levels and very clearly identify 'that's a valuable item', 'that's something I can eat', 'that's something I can throw', 'that's an object I can interact with but this other one isn't.'"

PERSONA OF INTEREST

The result is a game they hope is unusually approachable for its genre – backed up by a bite-sized, repeatable structure. "Some of this is us just getting older and being more time-poor, but it's very common for us personally as players to just replay what's familiar to us and feel daunted by any new title that might be a big investment. The idea of a game we could finish playing comfortably over a weekend, but with the potential of new experiences and decisions if we went back, was really appealing."

Abermore is built around a 'day loop', in which your Robin Hood-ish protagonist spends 18 days preparing for the ultimate score, taking on uniquely generated missions over the course of the brief campaign and selling their spoils on the black market. *Persona* and *80 Days* were key touchpoints. "*Abermore* isn't anywhere near as story heavy as either of those, but we liked how each of them engendered a feeling of being on a journey and internal growth in the player," Four Circle says. "We knew our influences came largely from RPGs and as a small team it was a nice way of getting to play with the structure of an RPG, without having to build a huge open world or write a thousand reams of text."

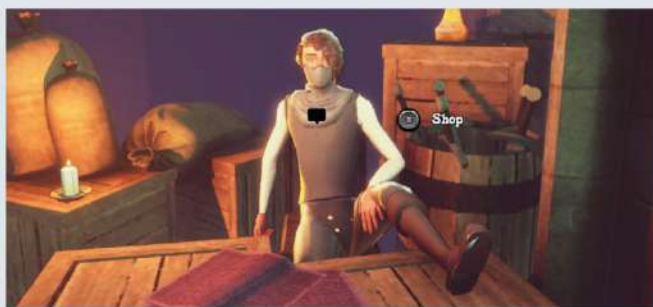
Four Circle worked with a "great selection" of writers for *Abermore*, each bringing their "weird perspectives" to the short stories you can stumble across while walking the streets of The Gutter. But from the beginning, *Abermore* was intended to help you tell your own anecdotes too.

"Having a wide range of interactable objects and tools at the player's disposal creates more opportunities for the player to express themselves and create stories," Four Circle says. "It allows players to be more in control of the tone. No one is forcing you to knock out someone with a sausage – but at least you have the option." ■

Jeremy Peel

FENCED OFF

Four definitions of the verb 'to fence'



- 1 Use a barrier to exclude someone or something.
- 2 Engage in some fencing – as in, with swords.
- 3 Conduct a discussion or argument in an evasive way.
- 4 Buy or sell stolen goods. Like in *Abermore*.



THE RESULT IS A GAME THEY HOPE IS UNUSUALLY APPROACHABLE FOR ITS GENRE



ABOVE: Games that tell you off for killing should have their own genre name. First-person tutters.

BELOW LEFT: Pictured: a 10 Second Ninja with only 1.25 seconds remaining.



DNA Tracing

ING'S LINEAGES EXPLORED

**UBI TORONTO WORKED
ON FIVE DIFFERENT
GAMES – BUT MOST
NEVER MATERIALISED**

SPLINTER FACTION

UBISOFT TORONTO is still fighting to build a reputation it can be proud of

It is the blessing and the curse of the younger sibling. On the one hand, the benefit of walking on ground already broken by the elder child, pre-flattened for ease of passage. On the other, the identity-smothering disappointment of the hand-me-down.

Ubisoft Toronto was built in the shadow of the publisher's flagship studio in Montreal – an enormous ideas factory responsible for *Splinter Cell*, *Prince of Persia*, and *Assassin's Creed*, the very foundations of the Ubi empire. Montreal's brightest lights were sent to Ontario's capital to establish the new outpost: producer extraordinaire Jade Raymond, who has since specialised in manifesting AAA studios, and the creative director Maxime Béland.

The latter brought with him a blueprint for what was, back in 2010, a shockingly modern take on the stealth game. At Ubi Montreal, Béland had led development on *Splinter Cell*:

Conviction, a series reboot that had applied his experience with *Rainbow Six: Vegas*, a cover shooter, to espionage. The result was a game that played with light and shadow, but paradoxically hinged on a move called 'mark and execute' – which saw Sam Fisher plug enemies in slo-mo as if they were melons lined up on a plank of wood. *Conviction* was acclaimed but controversial – a wobbly and dangerous jumping off point for a new studio.

Yet in making its follow-up, Ubi Toronto proved a talent for consolidation. *Splinter Cell: Blacklist* neither reversed *Conviction*'s bold changes, nor doubled down on its aggression at the expense of other approaches. Instead, it folded in the tools of traditional *Splinter Cell*

– body-hiding, non-lethal zappings and the ability to scout an upcoming room by sliding a sneaky snake cam beneath the door.

After Fisher saved the president in a scruffy jumper in *Conviction*, *Blacklist* recommitted to the gadget fantasy of Tom Clancy – and in a stroke of genius, gifted Fisher a personal plane to act as a mobile, *Mass Effect*-style hub. It remains a deeply underrated high point for the series, and ground zero for an important realisation: *Conviction*'s cover stealth wasn't a weird one-off, but a foundation for Ubi's future.

ATLAS SHRUGGED

In the aftermath, a ballooning Ubi Toronto worked on five different games – but most never materialised. The first, *Far Cry 5*, was led by Montreal, with areas of its map delegated to Toronto; studio veteran Navid Khavari recently told me about the "love and effort" that went into

telling the story of its Whitetail Mountains region, where Hope County militias fought a "pre-existing war". The second was *Starlink: Battle for Atlas* – a toys-to-life project no doubt greenlit as Ubi eyed the success of *Skylanders* and *Disney Infinity*. By the time it came out, however, the fad was fading. *Starlink* quickly sank, and with it Ubi Toronto's chance of building a universe of its own.

Worse, Ubi Toronto's very identity came into question when, in the summer of 2020, over 100 employees wrote to studio management with "grave concerns about ongoing reported harassment and an inability to feel safe or protected within our own studio". Around the same time, Béland in particular was accused of inappropriate workplace behaviour – including the alleged choking of a female colleague at a work party. He has since resigned from Ubisoft.

While the studio reckoned with the consequences of what Kotaku called a "party culture", Ubi Toronto tapped into its creative history in an attempt to build a more positive legacy. Handed another Montreal property, *Watch Dogs*, the studio threw out the car chase mechanics left over from its origins as a *Driver* game – instead focusing on the non-lethal cover stealth that had

BACK TO BLACK

Key quotes on the *Splinter Cell* remake

"The last couple of games all of us have worked on have been really big worlds, whereas what I love about a *Splinter Cell* map is every square inch represents intentionality."

"It's important for us to support players who observe the situations, make their plan, use their gadgets, and outsmart the enemy creatively to deal with the challenges."

"Seeing your mastery put on display at the end of things, especially when you go through with no alarms triggered – that's a big part of the *Splinter Cell* experience."

BELOW: *Blacklist* was misrepresented by a marketing campaign heavy on the explosions.



KEY

■ Ubisoft Toronto

■ Ubisoft Montreal



FAR CRY 3

The moment Ubi cracked the formula.



FAR CRY 4

Had the best villain, and angry wildlife.



FAR CRY 5

Ubi Toronto contributed to filling out Hope County.



FAR CRY 6

Slick, smart, and overly familiar.



SPLINTER CELL: CONVICTION

Sam Fisher became newly aggressive and mobile.



SPLINTER CELL: BLACKLIST

A considered follow-up that respected the past.



STARLINK: BATTLE FOR ATLAS

Arrived too late to take on Skylanders.



WATCH DOGS: LEGION

Commendably ambitious, deeply flawed.



SPLINTER CELL REMAKE

The original, rebuilt for the 2020s.



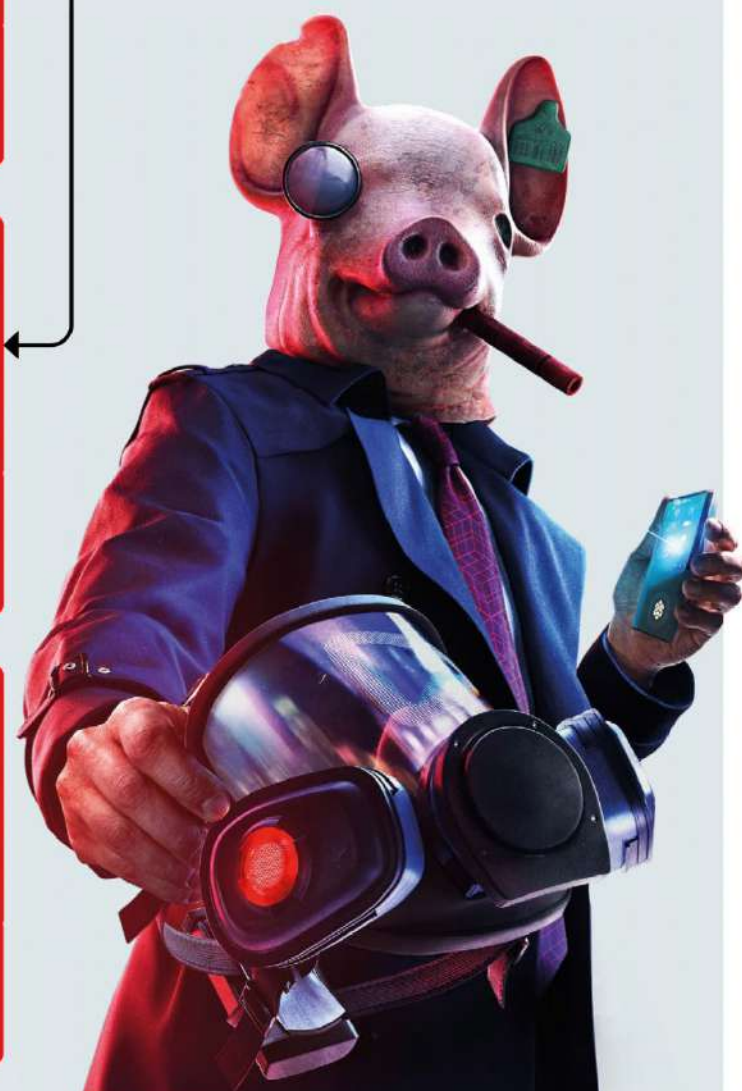
WATCH DOGS

Stealth, hacking, and driving in one package.



WATCH DOGS 2

The surprisingly sweet series high point.



COVERT ACTION

The creeping progress of a stealth specialist

» defined *Splinter Cell: Blacklist*. The result was *Legion*, a game that prided itself on options, filling London with police stations that could be infiltrated in uniform, shot up by a rogue MI6 agent, or simply circumvented on the back of a flying drone. The greatest expression of its freedom of approach was the play-as-anyone system – masterminded by another Montreal veteran, *Far Cry 2* director Clint Hocking – which allowed you to recruit any NPC as a protagonist.

NOT-SO-NEW CLOTHES

The sweat and thought that had gone into that system was palpable – accounting for every random car accident in a great unseen spreadsheet which instantly informs relatives, and recorded the attitudes of those relatives towards your hacker collective, DedSec. But there was a sense that the system was only partially connected to your play experience – as if some wires were missing or sparking – and the consequences of your actions were often unfelt. The sacrifices made for its implementation, meanwhile, were huge – clunky conversations and a plot crafted to fit literally any character, eliminating any chance of the specificity or character development that drives any great story.

Ubi Toronto swung in the other direction for *Far Cry 6* – putting a single protagonist front and centre by plumping for out-of-body cutscenes in a series that had always been resolutely first-person. It backed up the decision by stuffing the game with incidentally-triggered dialogue that ensured you could never forget you were playing as Dani Rojas – a charmingly flawed hothead who always sang along to Camila Cabello's Havana when it came on in the car. But the new perspective added unwanted distance, too: you never quite believed you were in the same room as *Far Cry 6*'s villain, played by the great Giancarlo Esposito.

OVERALL, FAR CRY 6 COULD HAVE DONE WITH MORE EXPERIMENTATION

A more serious misstep was the loot-shooter gear system, which broke apart the series's marvellous moveset to dole out perks piecemeal with boots and scarves. Overall, *Far Cry 6* could have done with more

experimentation, not less. As yet another hand-me-down from Montreal, *Far Cry* wasn't just pre-worn, but pre-worn-out – in need of a reboot to address the fatigue.

From the sounds of it, Ubi Toronto will get a chance at just that with its very first dance partner, *Splinter Cell*. The studio has started work on a remake of the original 2002 stealth classic in a next-gen engine,

eschewing open worlds to refocus on linear ghosting challenges. Sure, it's a second-hand project in a long line of inherited ideas – but one that has the potential to feel 'nearly new', rather than frayed and unravelling. ■

Jeremy Peel

ABOVE: Don't worry, the authorities can't see that incriminating line.



Molotov's not gonna do much good. Best way to deal with a C-68 is C4.

1 month



LEGO STAR WARS: THE SKYWALKER SAGA

RELEASE April 5 | **DEVELOPER** TT Games

An ambitious sequel that promises to not just let us play through the stories of all nine mainline Star Wars movies, but also to revamp the well-worn Lego game formula.



GLOVER

RELEASE April 20 | **DEVELOPER** Piko Interactive LLC

A cult classic 3D platformer where you play a disembodied, sentient glove. Lovingly remade from the original N64 source code for a modern PC release.



KING ARTHUR: KNIGHT'S TALE

RELEASE April 26 | **DEVELOPER** NeocoreGames

This dark fantasy turn-based RPG is due for its 1.0 launch out of Early Access. Play as Arthur's nemesis, Sir Mordred, and slay your old foe, now an undead monstrosity.

3 months



WH40K: CHAOS GATE - DAEMONHUNTERS

RELEASE May 5 | **DEVELOPER** Complex Games

'Warhammer meets XCOM' is a pitch sure to get mouths watering around our office, and what we've seen of the crunchy, tactical action has been very promising.



TWO POINT CAMPUS

RELEASE May 17 | **DEVELOPER** Two Point Studios

Another Bullfrog-aping, light-hearted management sim from the creators of *Two Point Hospital*, this time putting you in charge of a college and its surreal slate of courses.



STEELRISING

RELEASE June | **DEVELOPER** Spiders

Scrappy RPG developer Spiders is back with a strange clockpunk tale that sees you playing a robotic woman fighting her way through Paris during the French Revolution.

6 months



SAINTS ROW

RELEASE August 23 | **DEVELOPER** Volition

After recent entries escalated to alien invasions, virtual worlds, and a trip to actual Hell, this reboot is bringing things back down to Earth with a new cast of hip, trendy criminals.



FORSPOKEN

RELEASE October 11 | **DEVELOPER** Luminous Productions

A modern day New Yorker is transported to a fantasy realm, where her new magical powers come with the small catch that she has save the world.



GOTHAM KNIGHTS

RELEASE October 25 | **DEVELOPER** Warner Bros Games Montreal

A co-op game in the style of the *Arkham* series, but starring all of Batman's friends instead of the man himself, and with a generous sprinkling of RPG elements.

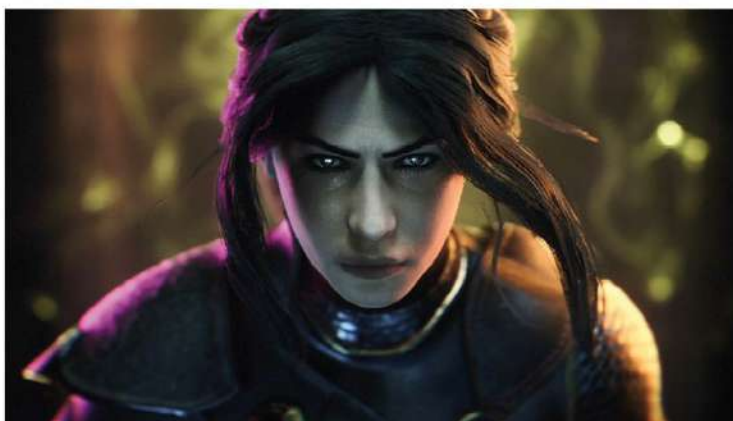
12 months+



STARFIELD

RELEASE November 11 | **DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios

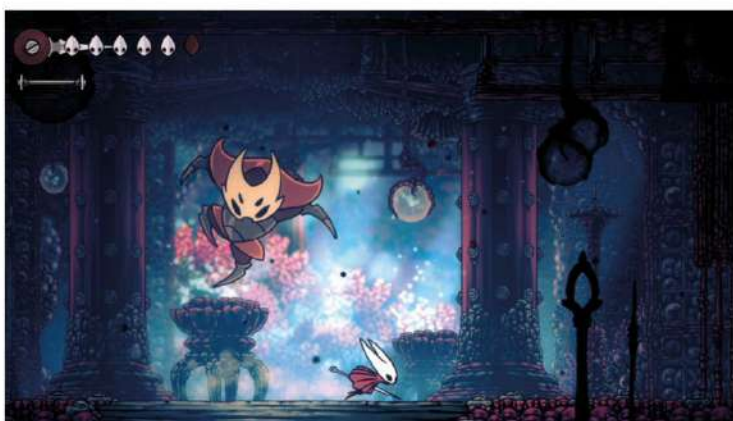
It sure has been a while since Bethesda last released a new singleplayer RPG – but if *'Skyrim in space'* can pull off its grand ambitions, it'll be worth the wait.



MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

RELEASE 2022 | **DEVELOPER** Firaxis Games

The creators of *XCOM* get experimental with a turn-based RPG starring the superheroes of the Marvel universe, alongside your own customisable main character.



HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG

RELEASE TBC | **DEVELOPER** Team Cherry

Come on, surely 2022 is the year we finally get this long-anticipated follow-up to one of the best indie Metroidvanias ever made? ...Please?

DELAYED

THE SETTLERS

Ubisoft's reboot of the classic strategy series has been pushed back, from March 17 to an unspecified "later date", following player feedback received during the closed beta.



PREVIEW

The Wandering Village



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

Spring/Summer 2022

DEVELOPER

Stray Fawn Studios

PUBLISHER

In-house

LINK

thewanderingvillage.com

THE WANDERING VILLAGE

This city never stops – because it's on top of huge monster

The moment I laid eyes on Onbu in *The Wandering Village* I was smitten. Onbu is a massive six-legged megasaur and I'm in charge of the village that sits on its back. I love this lumbering giant, and all I want is to make sure it loves me back.

That takes some doing and a lot of hard work. In *The Wandering Village*, a city building sim from Swiss developer Stray Fawn Studio, the planet is slowly being destroyed by toxic spores and the only hope of survival is to create a sturdy little society on the back of this massive, gentle creature as it trudges across the world. That means the village experiences different biomes as Onbu wanders through them, like arid zones where water is hard to come by and plants have difficulty growing, or corrupted zones that can infect the villagers and even make Onbu sick. Making the village itself roam around is a clever way to completely change the environmental conditions while letting you stick with one city.

WALKING TALL

Onbu is sleeping when I start the demo of *The Wandering Village*, so in typical city-building fashion I dispatch my 16 tiny villagers to chop trees, gather stones, and start building stuff. I have them construct tents for shelter, a farm to grow beets, and a research centre to unlock new tech. Soon there's a gatherer's hut to collect berries for food and a device to suck

PLAYED IT

moisture out of the air for water, and each villager's task (building, gathering, cooking) can easily be prioritised with the click of a button or by adding or removing workers at each structure.

As I finish setting up my first few buildings, Onbu suddenly stirs, wakes up and stands. It takes a while for the massive beast to get up on all six of its legs. Then we're off. Slowly, but surely. The wandering has begun.

There's sort of an issue with living on the back of a truly massive creature. At least at first, Onbu simply doesn't give a damn that I'm scrambling around on its back building sawmills and stone quarries. It stops when it wants, it sleeps when it wants, and it chooses its path through the world without any input from me. There's not even a way to communicate with my gargantuan taxi until I research and unlock a big horn, and even after assigning a tiny villager to toot it, Onbu rarely listens to me when I tell it to lie down, or walk, or run. And why should it? It has no reason to trust me, just like a dog has no reason to trust the fleas crawling around on its fur.

That slowly changes, though. Onbu will sometimes stop to graze while it's walking through the world, but I invest some research in discovering a way to feed the beast myself. How do you feed something so big it can carry a village around? Well, the top scientific minds in my village unlock a food trebuchet. Yep, we're gonna launch food into its mouth with a medieval weapon.

Luckily I've already got farmers growing mushrooms, and I'm then able to build a special kitchen to make Onbu's favourite mushroom-based meal. Then I have a citizen launch the food out of the village and right into Onbu's mouth. It's pretty exciting to watch as the massive creature turns its head and catches the little meals I'm launching at it. In fact it's maybe the most fun I've had feeding a creature in a game, ever.

DR DO-A-LOT

I don't have to stop at being Onbu's personal chef: I can also be its physician. I build a little hot air balloon so doctors can fly up out of the village and cure Onbu whenever it gets sick from the poison spores that cloud the road at certain points. And once I've given Onbu a few

ONBU RARELY LISTENS TO ME WHEN I TELL IT TO LIE DOWN, OR WALK, OR RUN



PREVIEW

The Wandering Village



RIGHT: You're building a real city on the go.

FAR RIGHT: Try to create a paradise in the apocalypse.



The Wandering Village



>> reasons to trust me, it finally starts listening (sometimes) when I toot the horn with instructions. And that's pretty important. If we're headed for a patch of desert on the map, I might want to put Onbu in rest mode while I gather as much water as possible, or assign extra workers to the farms. And, while I don't know if it helps, I tell Onbu to run through toxic regions, hoping that spending less time in them will lower the chance of infection. It's pretty satisfying when the big creature listens, but also sometimes when it doesn't. With a shake of its big head, Onbu tells me it's gonna do its own thang. And it's nice that the gentle creature retains a little bit of agency.

There are some more... pragmatic options in the tech tree, though I find them almost unthinkable. I was horrified to see that there's a dung collector you can unlock that *drills into Onbu's back*, which will lower the creature's trust in you. And why wouldn't it? Don't drill through a creature's body so you can collect its poo, no matter how much you need it for farming. There's also a blood extractor, which not only damages Onbu's trust but lowers its health. The blood can be used to make delicious pudding for your villagers, but, jeez. I don't think I can use either of those devices. I want Onbu to be happy, so I definitely don't want to start digging holes in its back.

I need to keep my villagers happy and healthy, too, which is challenging at times. They don't really like eating beet soup and living in tents, and their productivity suffers as a result, which means I sometimes run low on food and other resources. I can definitely see the benefits of improving my crop output with some fertiliser, and having some delicious blood pudding would probably make my citizens better workers. But instead I focus on unlocking wheat which I hope to make into bread, and I eventually have enough wood to replace tents with proper huts. Balancing which to unlock first, useful stuff for your villagers or friendly tech for the monster your village is built on, is kind of tricky, especially as Onbu trudges through increasingly hostile areas of the world.

DON'T DRILL THROUGH A CREATURE'S BODY SO YOU CAN COLLECT ITS POO

ENHANCE!

I feel like zoom levels are weirdly important in city builders – it can be a little disappointing when you can't zoom all the way in to really get a good look at your citizens and what they're doing (like, say, in *Frostpunk*). No complaints here in *The Wandering Village*. Push the camera in and go from a top-down view of the village to a nearly side-on look, and you can really see your little folks going about their business, carrying resources from here to there, busily hitting rocks with their pickaxes, and (unfortunately) even dying and leaving tiny little graves behind when things don't go their way. (In this case it wasn't entirely my fault, because I briefly ran out of beet soup.)

Zoom out a bit more to the top-down view and you can slide right off the edge of the village and look down Onbu's massive head as it trudges along. Zoom out more and you have a great view of the gentle giant and the surrounding biome, be it an arid desert or cloud of poison spores. Go up one more level and you can see the map, showing you points of interest to send village scouts to investigate (a bit like *Frostpunk*'s exploration mode) and branching paths you can choose (if you've built a horn, and if Onbu is in the mood to take directions). This game knows how to zoom. I love the blend of 2D and 3D art and animation, too. It's lovely to look up both up close and from far away.

What isn't so lovely are those toxic spores that Onbu occasionally walks through – they turn out to be a major problem for me in the demo. Those spores land and begin reproducing and you can't just ignore them, even if they only appear in a tiny corner of Onbu's back, far away from the village, like they did for me. They spread shockingly fast, eventually covering nearly half of Onbu's back, and soon the spores were infecting many of my villagers. I quickly researched and built a decontamination station (citizens who work there will burn the fungus with little flamethrowers) but it was far too late. Soon nearly all my villagers had succumbed to illness. I reached the end of the demo before everyone perished, but it wasn't looking hopeful. At least Onbu was still doing OK, mostly because I'd built him a hot air balloon filled with doctors. I just wish I'd shown the same courtesy to my actual villagers.

Chris Livingston



ABOVE: The exquisite details on the town buildings are nearly all animated.

RIGHT: Items and artefacts let you customise Welders beyond levelling up.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Spring 2022 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER
Lavapotion

PUBLISHER
Coffee Stain

LINK
songsofconquest.com

SONGS OF CONQUEST

Discovering strategies both magical and mighty

Taking the strategy adventure concept and bringing it into the new millennium, *Songs of Conquest* just might be the kind of indie to start a genre revival. Backed by *Satisfactory*, *Deep Rock Galactic*, and *Valheim* publisher Coffee Stain, developer Lavapotion is rebuilding a strategy genre abandoned by the gaming mainstream.

Strategy adventure games haven't wholly disappeared, what with the revived *Age of Wonders* games so well-received, but there's still something to be said for the concept of the old *Might & Magic* games. *Songs of Conquest* gets that, and it sets you up for the blend of tactical combat and strategic exploration that made those so beloved.

"We look at this as a revitalisation of a genre that should never have gone away," said Magnus Alm, a designer at Lavapotion. That goes all the way back to the basic design of the four game campaigns, which Alm says "act simultaneously as some kind of tutorial, kind of like how they did in the old *Starcraft* games. There is a story, some immersion, but we add new game elements in each mission". I was able to sit down with both the first campaign and the skirmish mode, and what I found was a delightful little strategy game that supported both relaxed map-exploration modes and competitive skirmish battles.

In a key departure from the standards of the old *Might & Magic* games, the tactical combat is balanced around unit

caps rather than just stacking as much as you can into one army. A unit of rats might be able to have 100 members, footmen 40, and necromantic abominations a mere 5. Units also have small abilities, such as a musician inspiring your army, or a group of engineers setting out spiked stakes to slow the enemy's approach. Each army is led by a Wielder, their general, who doesn't fight but provides bonuses to their troops. Each faction has nine to choose from and recruit.

Meanwhile, different units generate the magical currencies for Wielders to cast spells. Skeletons might help with destruction magic, while human archers support order spells, and tortoise-people are good for creation magic. The points they summon up are used to cast spells in combat, some from single schools, but many of the most interesting take magic from several schools. I was partial to Swap, a Chaos/Creation spell that made two troops switch places, and Explosive Fungi, a Destruction/Creation spell that summoned mushroom land mines.

FROGS AND GUNPOWDER

Of course, all this reimagined design wouldn't get *Songs of Conquest* anywhere without interesting factions. I tried out all four, and I have to say I was pretty pleased with the results of the world and faction design.

"We envisioned the game's factions to be very asymmetrical," said Alm. He and the team are what he described as "huge fans of fantasy worlds" and the details that you can find in *Songs of Conquest's* art and worldbuilding are testament to it.

Arleon is one faction, a knightly and noble barony with Arthurian influences forced to make unsavoury deals with faeries to survive. There's also the traders of Barya who blend pike and shot tactics with desert-dwelling ogres. Finally, there's the Rana, a confederation of weird swamp creatures like frog, lizard, and tortoise people with a secretive, glorious past.

In about ten hours with *Songs of Conquest*, I got a good idea of the kind of adventure we're in for when it launches into Early Access this spring. With its 2.5D aesthetics, creative world and fun tactics, it seems to me that we're looking at another hit from Coffee Stain publishing.

Jon Bolding

PLAYED IT



A poison gas spell backs Barya into a corner.

DIFFERENT UNITS GENERATE THE MAGICAL CURRENCIES FOR WIELDERS TO CAST SPELLS

PREVIEW

Batora: Lost Haven



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2022

DEVELOPER
Stormind Games

PUBLISHER
Team17

LINK
stormindgames.com

BATORA: LOST HAVEN

Balance mind and body in a neon fantasy world

Balancing a feature set and mechanical elegance can present designers with a challenge. Throw too many different ideas in, and contrasting systems can clash, undermining purity of experience. So Stormind Games has made a bold move in embellishing its action-RPG with hack-and-slash, twin stick shooter, and narrative elements.

Presented from a dynamic isometric perspective, *Batora: Lost Haven* is a game driven by its story, casting you as Avril, a spirited young woman who steps up to restore Earth to its former glory after it's ravished by a devastating event. Avril has been granted powers that come in two flavours – physical and mental. Hopping between each, these abilities present a duality system that frames how you approach melee combat, ranged attacks, regular environmental puzzle solving, and more.

As such, the concept of transferring between forms – either the physically or mentally focused – presents a singular thread that does a great job of uniting *Batora's* various and sometimes disparate elements. It would seem Stormind has done an impressive job of making a game with a great many mechanics feel fluid, elegant, and cohesive.

Avril's quest will take you through winding pathways that connect open areas where much of the combat takes place. In physical mode, your standard and special attacks are powerful and designed for close quarters clashes.

ATTACK WITH A MATCHING COLOUR, AND YOU DEAL MORE DAMAGE

Switch to mental powers, and the focus is on ranged shots controlled via a conventional twin stick system. Each of Avril's states is colour coded to make it clear which powers you have activated: purple for mental attacks and orange for physical attacks. Enemies too, are marked with one of those two hues. Attack with a matching colour, and you deal more damage. Meet a foe with a contrasting power, and while the harm you inflict is reduced, you fill orbs that grant you increased power when activated.

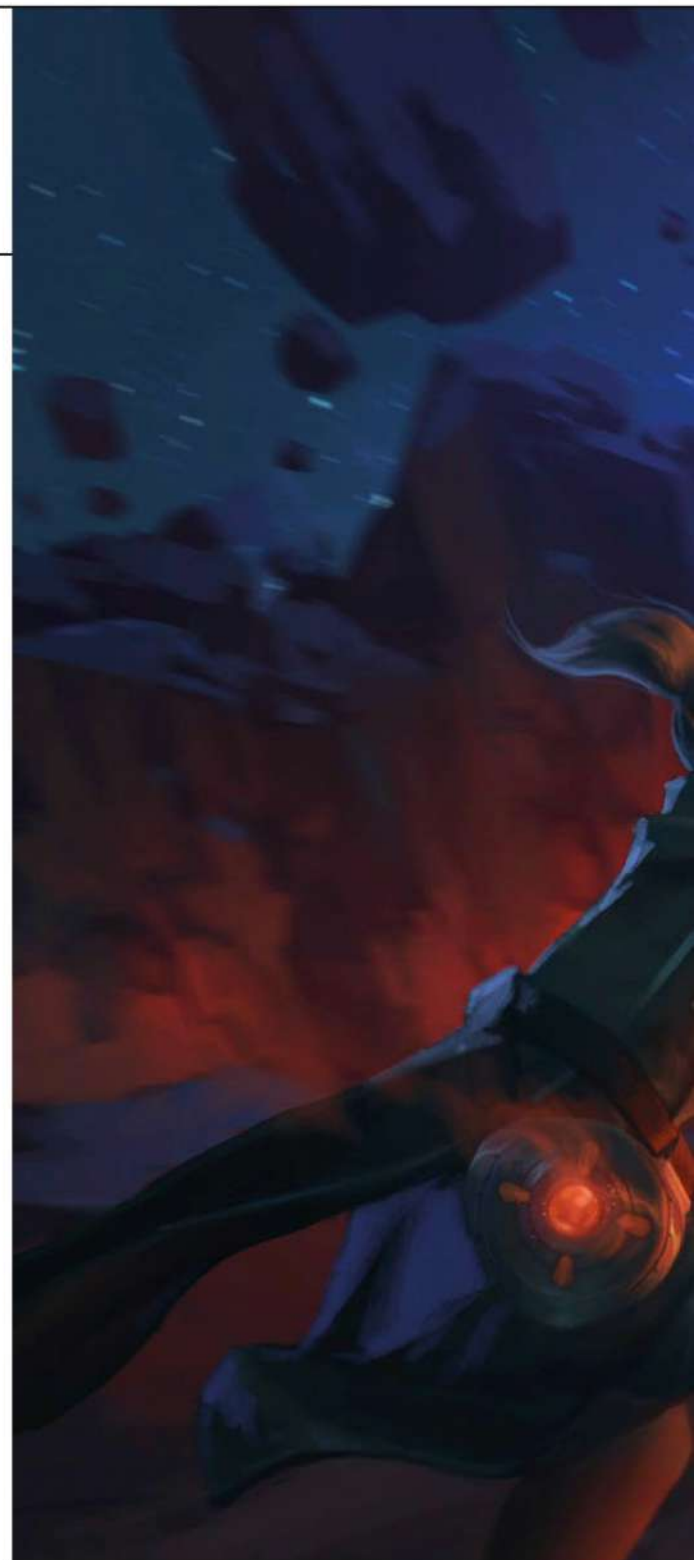
FAR FROM HAVEN

Avril also uses her duality of powers to overcome frequent environmental puzzles. That means thinking your way through maze-like areas filled with rotating and raising platforms, movable walls, and other obstacles to progress. Using ranged and melee attacks to smash colour-coded gems shifts elements of the level around, clearing a path to your goal. Occasionally you'll have to do the likes of possessing and guiding large stone balls to weigh down floor switches, or make sure you only stand on platforms that match your current colour state. Certainly, there are whispers of early *Zelda* games and myriad 3D platformers in the puzzle sections – which are presented brilliantly, with slashes of neon and careful lighting highlights making them distinct and striking.

Throughout *Batora*, while there's a fair amount of technical polishing needed as expected in a preview build, the look and styling is strong. It arguably leans heavily into conventional fantasy aesthetics, but from the illustrated conversation art to the level design, there's plenty to enjoy. The writing and performance aren't entirely consistent, but when they sing they soar – and they seem to capably serve a game where player decisions at narrative branching points appear to have a large effect on the unfolding experience.

Ultimately, while *Batora* isn't wildly innovative in terms of the genre elements it combines, it is certainly compelling, thoughtfully balanced, and moves along with a spritely pace. Avril and her crew are a cast you want to spend time with, and Stormind has built a delightful experience that already has its hooks in me.

Will Freeman





ABOVE: Some of the game's art away from the interactive elements showcases a luscious, hand painted feel.

LEFT: The level designers at Stormind clearly know how to do a reveal. *Batora* is filled with moments that frame the route ahead of you.

Lost in Play

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Summer 2022

DEVELOPER
Happy Juice Games

PUBLISHER
Joystick Ventures

LINK
happyjuice.games

LOST IN PLAY

Time to lose your way, but find yourself

A giant horned monster? A frog wearing glasses? Flying teacups? It all makes perfect sense in a child's imagination, which is exactly where this game takes us. A brother and sister travel in a world transformed by their fantasies, which translates to puzzles and innocent but effective giggles for us.

Somehow, *Lost in Play* looks even more delightful in motion than it does on the page. 'It's like a cartoon' has been an overused description in the game industry for decades, but it's appropriate here. The bright and distinctive art, plentiful puzzles, and nonsense language spoken by the characters are reminiscent of *Chuchel*; but this is a game happily skipping along its own path.

It's essentially a point-and-click adventure but, from what I've played at least, you'll never be carrying more than a few items at a time, and never for very long. Any combinations are made automatically as soon as you have the appropriate items in your inventory, too; it's a deliberately smooth and friendly experience. If puzzle games are cars given to you by the developer, then this one points out where the keys are instead of throwing them over the fence when you're not looking.

An easy game, then? What's in the demo, certainly. Some puzzles might take a few tries to figure out, but there's always something to make you laugh and smile along the way to the solution

(and there's always a hint available if you need it). Well... apart from the draughts-style game I had to play against a tree-dwelling creature in order to win a quest item. People smarter than me whizzed through it first time, I'm sure, but I took an *embarrassing* amount of time to win. I hope it can be skipped in the final game, and we will now never speak of this again.

PLAY, LADY, PLAY

The point is, the simple act of playing something for fun can (and should be) fulfilling in itself, which is what *Lost in Play* is going for – hence the desire to avoid major roadblocks to progress. In the demo, there's plenty in the children's imagination, and even the real world, to enjoy. A frog wearing a hat wants a can opener? Of course he does! Fill up the cups in a tea party with a watering can? Of course – kid logic. And if you're going to sneak past a monster, then *of course* you use the handily-placed hollow log to crawl through. Failing that, there's always the cat licking its own bumhole under your bed to laugh at.

It seems that the sister is the younger of the two, with the brother creeping into his teenage years. I'm very interested to see where the developer goes with this. The game begins in her dream and, when she wakes up, the first significant puzzle to be solved is fixing the alarm clock to force him into the waking world. He's not too pleased about this, and once awake, mopes downstairs with what looks suspiciously like a GameBoy. He then initially resists your attempts to play a game... until you gather what you need for a monster costume, and he dives straight into play.

Even if the potential for exploring this age gap and its implications isn't met, this is still a game that I can't wait to play more of. I like a dark and edgy game as much as the next socially maladjusted individual, but something innocent that can be properly enjoyed by the whole family is – for me – much more impressive. 'Fun' and 'wholesome' is a tricky balance to keep but, so far, *Lost in Play* is nailing it.

Luke Kemp



THERE'S ALWAYS THE CAT LICKING ITS OWN BUMHOLE UNDER YOUR BED TO LAUGH AT



ABOVE: Why would you hang this one up?

LEFT: You'll spot the real-world counterparts of some imagination characters.

PREVIEW

Warhammer 40,000: Shootas, Blood & Teef



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Summer 2022

DEVELOPER
Rogueside

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
shootasbloodteef.com

WARHAMMER 40K: SHOOTAS, BLOOD & TEEF

War's what orks are gud for

Orks are the French Bulldogs of Warhammer's: irredeemably stupid, irresistibly charming, and questionably bred. With their weird 'waaaaaghs' and Dakka and dum dum mockney accents, they're the perfect vessel for the traditionally austere universe of Warhammer 40,000 to go in a more bouncy and lighthearted direction.

In fact, this shooter-platformer's uniquely irreverent take on 40K is probably an accurate depiction of how the bellicose orks actually perceive battle – a great big playground to tear around in, complete with a metal soundtrack that rolls along with the momentum of a Big Trakk across a skull-strewn wasteland. War is what orks live for!

My demo had the rip-roaring feel of a Royal Rumble as I made my way from left to right through several arenas filled with platforms, explosive barrels, and steady streams of orks and goblins bounding towards me armed with shootas and a cheery disposition.

To dismember your fellow orks, you have several guns, throwable fire bombs, a melee attack, and a WAAAAGH bar that sends you into a frenzy once it fills up. You pick up ammo out in the field, and restore health by munching on rather cute Squigs who bound around the arenas wearing head mirrors as if to say, "Eat me, I'm a doctor!" The hand-drawn paper cut-out style of enemies – where each limb seems

tenuously stuck onto the torso with a drawing pin – lends itself well to desecration, and the body parts bounce freely all over the stage as I shoot my way through my green kin.

GREEN ENERGY

The broad visual style and mechanics, whereby movement and aiming are separately controlled by the left and right sticks (or keyboard and mouse), are pretty much an orkification of developer Rogueside's mafia-vs-zombies game *Guns, Gore & Cannoli*. It's a game that's not about brute force as you might expect, but more about constant movement, luring your trail of enemies in one direction before jumping down through a platform then letting rip while running backwards.

It's tougher than it looks, and satisfaction comes more from dodging death on the last smidgen of your HP than some power trip where you eventually disappear under a swarm of orks. You die (frequently), then you jump straight back in to just before the scuffle that killed you.

Fans of Rogueside's previous work will instantly feel at home with the run-and-gun feel here, though it does come with some mechanical awkwardness when played with a gamepad. Having the jump button on a platformer mapped to the left trigger rather

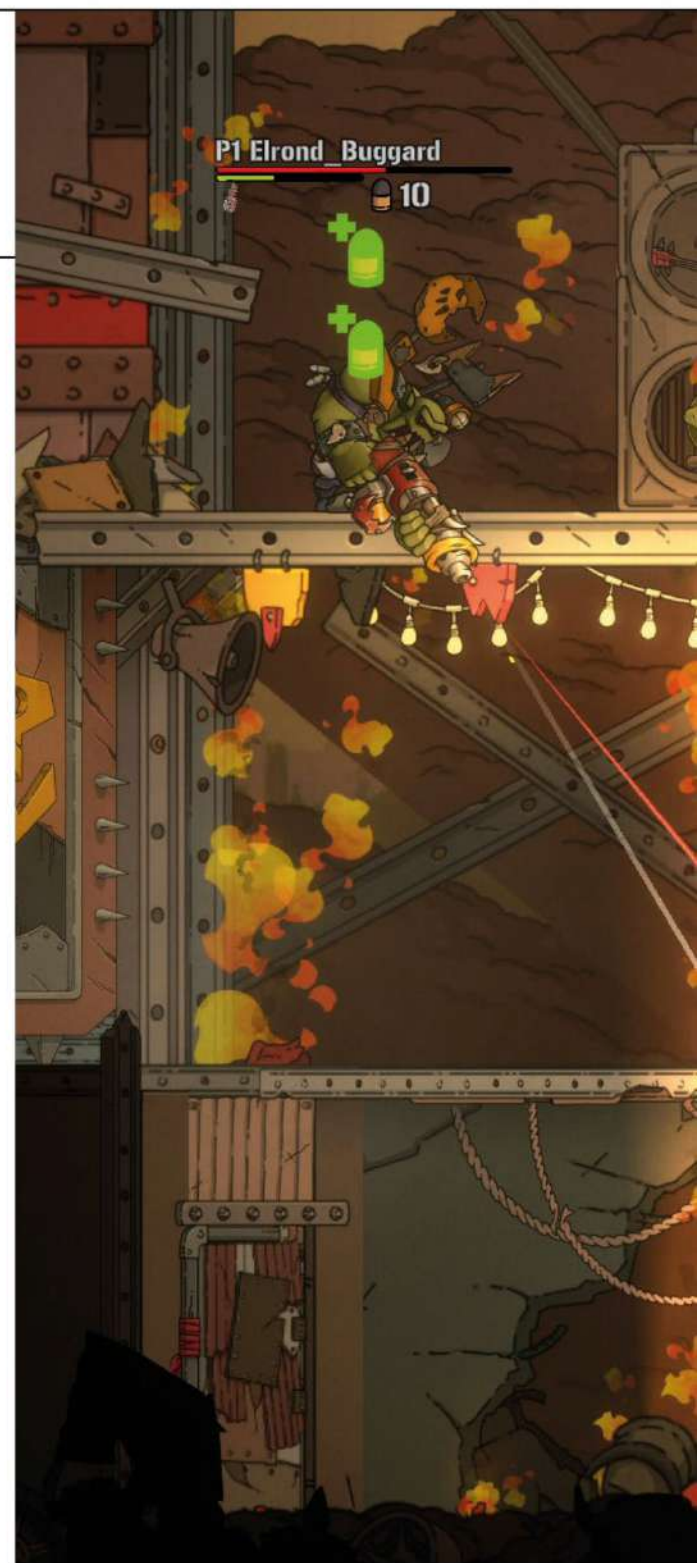
than the bottom face button defies decades of muscle memory. And having the weapon wheel assigned to the top face button and rotated via the right analog is an abomination that forces my double-jointed fingers into a dazzling display of contortionism.

And while the soundtrack is punchy enough that by the end of your session you'll develop a square jaw and fanged canines, it flatters some quite floaty melee mechanics where slashing at enemies has the impact of swatting at helium balloons (that then break into several smaller helium balloons); it could really use a bit more crunch.

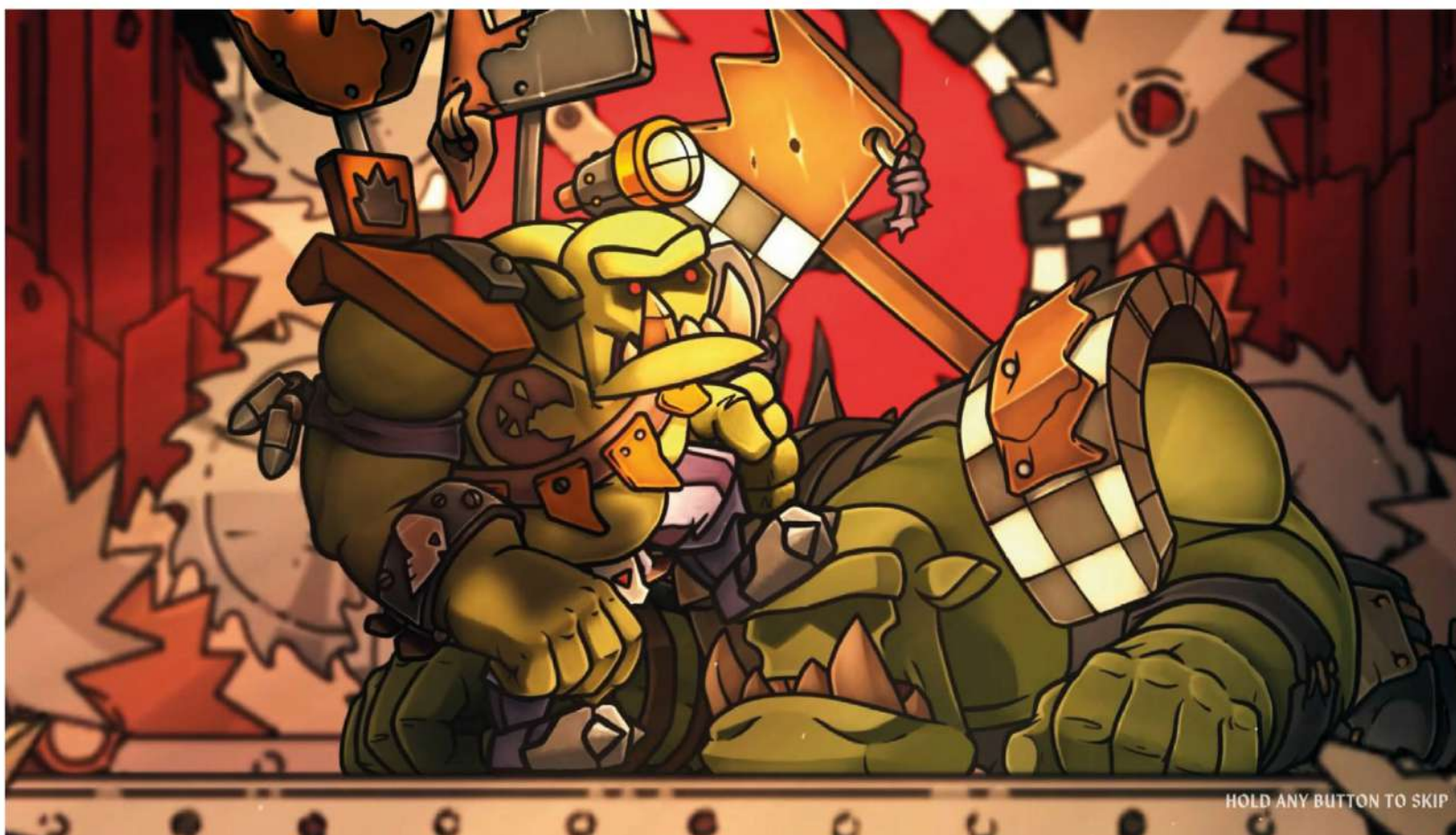
But with no set release date yet, there's time to tune up this chirpy little war machine. And however much more polish it may or may not get, its four-player co-op and PvP modes could make it a fine addition to those local multiplayer/party game collections.

Robert Zak

FANS OF ROGUESIDE'S PREVIOUS WORK WILL INSTANTLY FEEL AT HOME



The weapon wheel is an ergonomic nightmare on gamepad (for now).



ABOVE: The pyrotechnics get a little out of hand during the battle against Boss Nob.

LEFT: The action is broken up by these rather cute cutscenes.

Instruments of Destruction



NEED TO KNOW

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INSTRUMENTS OF DESTRUCTION

Rip and tear, but with buildings instead of demons

Orgy is a word laden with expectation, but in this context it comes paired with the words ‘of destruction’. Build a vehicle, drive it into things, destroy them, fulfil an objective, then unlock new blades and smashy things to upgrade your vehicle for the next level.

That’s about it, though there’s a sandbox too. And if that sounds a bit like *Besiege*, *Abriss*, or *Teardown*, well, it kind of is. Currently in Early Access, extra parts for your destructive vehicles are being added all the time, so today’s wheeled wagon with blades might become tomorrow’s tracked terror covered with circular saws.

A level begins with your vehicle floating in space, a weight and value limit imposed on what you can create. While it’s easy to write this time off as just bashing parts together, it’s actually essential if you want to complete the level. You’ll spend a lot of time here, pondering why you’ve failed, what you can do to your vehicle to smash through the barrier stopping you next time, and whether you can look awesome doing it.

An attempt at humour backfired when a pair of wrecking balls positioned on the back of my vehicle like prominent testicles were the cause of my vehicle getting hopelessly stuck while close to a level’s objective. The resulting redesign replaced them with saw blades, and also went badly, necessitating the radical shortening of my wheelbase for the next attempt.

MANY LEVELS END IN RESIGNATION RATHER THAN ACTUAL FAILURE

FURY ROAD

You can start from scratch or redesign an existing model, which tend to be big on wheels and low on weapons in our opinion. Covering a vehicle in blades and spiked balls like an even more crazed version of Mad Max’s War Boys is effective, but levels have value limits that make building a more thoughtful process. First thing to go are all the fancy covers over unused attachment points, then the upward-pointing blades there to prevent the machine flipping over. Only then do I consider removing the giant magnet I placed on the back of the vehicle, just to see what it would do.

The game likes to mix it up a bit by asking you to explode barrels, destroy a particular number of buildings (they collapse in satisfying piles of bricks and particles, the Unity engine seemingly as comfortable taking things apart as it is bringing them together), collect crystals, or submerge containers (drowning your vehicle is an instant failure). Herding containers in a machine covered in rotating saw blades can be a tricky process, until you remember you can turn them off. A bulldozer blade on the other end would have made it much easier, underlining the importance of reading the mission instructions before going blundering in.

Many levels end in resignation rather than actual failure – an acceptance that there’s no more you can do and a return to the building screen. Actual full-blown failures are rare, and as you gradually creep across the archipelago map you unlock new parts and new completed vehicles, all of them asking to be taken back to the start to see what they can do. You never have to build a custom vehicle to complete the campaign, but to miss out on the possibilities this opens up would be a shame.

Coming from a one-man dev team, this is remarkable stuff. The graphics with their pleasing hint of Lego Techno, plus the bloom lighting that sees blades flash as you spin the camera around, suit the subject matter perfectly, Steam Workshop support is already in place, and despite its Early Access status this is already a polished, entertaining game. Hopefully it gets even better from here.

Ian Evenden



BUILD REQUIREMENT
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START BUILD TUTORIAL



Take one pre-built vehicle, add more blades, watch out grass.



ABOVE: Should the blades not be large enough, you can double them in size.

LEFT: Explosive barrels? In my game? It's more likely than you think.

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POWER

**TMNT: SHREDDER'S
REVENGE** revisits
the glory days of Ninja
Turtles brawlers

BY TED LICHFIELD

By the time I was a kid growing up in the late 1990s and early 2000s, arcades were already well on their way out.

Home gaming on consoles and PCs has long overtaken the hobby's original home, relegating it to a novelty for nostalgia-baiting barcades in gentrified neighbourhoods.

Still, I found my way into arcades over the years: a friend's birthday party at a local pizza joint, or killing time while off on my own during a family vacation. One game that I always ran into without fail was *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Turtles in Time*.

Turtles in Time and its predecessor, simply titled *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, remain the gold standard of TMNT games to this day, combining simple, yet fast-paced and

explosive combat with drop-in, four-player co-op and the kind of visually striking pixel art backdrops which help 16-bit games remain a favourite of so many players.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge is an attempt to bring the magic of those old arcade classics to PC and consoles, while also sanding the edges and shaping the experience into a better fit for at-home play. Freed from the need to suck up quarters from unskilled players as a business model, and to be short enough to be finishable in a single sitting, *Shredder's Revenge* has the potential to be better than arcade-perfect.

HEROES IN A HALF SHELL

Publisher Dotemu and developer Tribute Games have made their business capturing the joy of this era of gaming. Montreal-based Tribute was founded by ex-Ubisoft veterans who previously worked on games like the TMNT movie tie-in for Gameboy >>

COVER FEATURE

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge

» Advance, and the much-beloved *Scott Pilgrim vs the World* brawler for Xbox Live Arcade. It's been responsible for numerous retro revival indie projects, including the Gameboy Color-esque puzzle shooter *Wizorb* and the *Megaman*-inspired platformer, *Panzer Paladin*.

French developer/publishing house Dotemu has had an extensive body of work in the retro space, putting out ports of classic games like the Steam re-releases of the early *Final Fantasies*, as well as original projects like the upcoming *Metal Slug Tactics* or *Streets of Rage 4* – a continuation of a different beloved sidescrolling beat-'em-up staple.

Tribute had been pitching Nickelodeon on a potential Ninja Turtles project for several years to no avail. When Dotemu was approached by Nickelodeon and given a list of potential properties to adapt in a new game, its first choice was TMNT. Upon finding out about Tribute's long campaign for a Ninja Turtles project through the Game Developers Conference grapevine, the two development houses made contact and began collaborating on a new Ninja Turtles brawler: what we now know as *Shredder's Revenge*.

I had the chance to view a demo of the studios' collaborative revival of *Shredder's Revenge* and talk to Dotemu CEO Cyrille Imbert and Tribute Games co-founders Jean-Francois Major and Jonathan Lavigne. They characterise this TMNT project as being in conversation with their earlier efforts. Some of the Tribute veterans who came over from Ubisoft are relishing the opportunity to get another crack at the licence, feeling the GBA tie-in wasn't able to live up to its full potential, while Imbert is

clear that *Streets of Rage 4* was very much an influence on *Shredder's Revenge*, even joking that *SoF4* "reassured us that beat-'em-ups could still be a thing".

I've seen the game's first, second and fourth stages, and I'm impressed with *Shredder's Revenge*. Each mission begins with an animated cutscene just like the arcade games, with retro charm and an art style closer to the 1987 Ninja Turtles cartoon than anything that's come since. The developers tell me that they want each mission to feel like an episode of that TV show – self-contained, but feeding into a larger story.

Up to four players can choose any of the games' six characters in each mission, but the demo is limited to two players, though each cycles through the different characters to showcase their differences for me. The first mission sees Michelangelo and Leonardo trying to rescue a TV station under attack by long-time Turtles villain and pig-man Bebop. Right away what stands out to me – aside from the detailed pixel art characters and environments – is that each turtle now has his own moveset, complete with run cycles, special moves, and the relative strength of each of their attacks.

TURTLE TIER LIST

Lavigne tells me that they started small: just slight differences in speed or attack strength between each of the Turtles to mix up the experience. But it grew from there. "We wanted to differentiate them more and more. We looked into translating their personalities more into their movesets. Some of it came from the animations, like the animators were excited and pushed for a move."



In the original arcade games, there were only cosmetic differences between each character, but gameplay was functionally the same. Now the Turtles move at different speeds, have unique weapon hitboxes and charge attacks, and even have unique mobility options. Michelangelo, for example, can bounce from enemy to enemy by landing on top of them, and Raphael's divekick knocks enemies into the air. It serves to lend a layer of strategy and synergy to your choice of character and how they play.

As the demo proceeds through the TV station, the meticulous pixel art environments continue to catch my attention. Enemies engage in fun ambient actions, like one Foot Clan ninja who idly occupies the reception desk of the station, or numerous others who are ransacking the offices or playing on Game Boys before the Turtles catch their attention. It all contributes to a sense of cartoony joy.

The level consists of several fights in business offices, the sets of



ABOVE: Phone booths, banks of TVs, and a breakdancing mat – these are truly turtles out of time.

LEFT: April and Donatello drop their special attacks at the same time.



THE TURTLES HAVE UNIQUE WEAPON HITBOXES AND CHARGE ATTACKS

a workout video, cooking show, and finally the news desk before culminating in a boss fight against the porcine villain, Bebop. He has an eclectic set of melee attacks and grows more aggressive as his health bar drops, but this early level doesn't seem too tricky to get through on the whole.

The second mission consists of some gritty New York city streets under attack by the rhino-faced Rocksteady. The players take control of Donatello and long-time TMNT side character April O'Neil, in a rare playable appearance. Donatello attacks slower but with a longer range than other characters, and April brings increased speed with decreased damage per hit. She uses a reporter's microphone as a bludgeon, alongside a spin attack with a TV camera as her special move.

Going through the stage, it really evokes a 1980s cartoon notion of city streets, complete with chop shops, Foot Clan graffiti, and delightfully anachronistic banks of TVs in shop windows showing a broadcast from

GHOSTS OF TURTLES PAST

The influences on Shredder's Revenge



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

1989, Arcade
Not the very first TMNT videogame, but a huge hit – it went on to be the highest-grossing arcade game of the 1990s.



TMNT: TURTLES IN TIME

1991, Arcade
This is the one I played as a kid: bigger, faster, and prettier than the first brawler. *Turtles in Time* was everything you'd want out of a beat-'em-up sequel.



TMNT

2007, Game Boy Advance
One of several adaptations of the '07 movie, the GBA version was a throwback 2D brawler. Some of its developers went on to work at Tribute.





» Bebop – a cute nod to the previous mission. About halfway through, Donatello reveals a secret by attacking an apartment door in the background of one of the scenes: frequent TMNT side character Irma appears, thanks the players, and goes on her way. Major and Lavigne imply that this figures into a sequence of interactions with the character, and that there will be other such NPC side objectives in the game.

BEAT THAT

This brings me to one of Tribute and Dotemu's biggest priorities with the project: making a beat-'em-up that satisfies the demands of a modern audience, while preserving the DNA of the genre. Lavigne reveals that the game will include a full story campaign, as well as secrets, NPC interactions like the one with Irma, and "light progression elements". It's a delicate balance to strike – you wouldn't want a game like this to go overboard with skill trees, experience points, or other modern AAA staples. But ahead of the demo I was

certainly curious how the devs would ensure *Shredder's Revenge's* feels like a full package to a 2022 player.

The old arcade games were meant to be beaten in one sitting after all, and a full playthrough of *Turtles in Time* by a competent team could take under 40 minutes. That's where Dotemu's experience on *Streets of Rage 4* comes in handy, with the player feedback on that game informing future development. Cyrile tells me that it helped the company "learn what the expectations of the modern beat-'em-up community are".

The team keeps the game's third stage under wraps for the time being and shows me the fourth level of *Shredder's Revenge*, called Rumble at the Zoo, choosing Raphael and Master Splinter to attempt to thwart an attack on Central Park by Groundchuck and Dirtbag. The level maintains the high quality of background art as it shifts from a classic Central Park scene – complete with destructible public chess boards – through tiger and monkey enclosures and a reptile

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge



**THE GENEROUS
ATTACK HITBOXES
SHOULD BRING ITS
FEEL MORE IN LINE
WITH MODERN
3D ACTION GAMES**

ABOVE: The Foot Clan really like to make themselves at home wherever they go.

TOP RIGHT: Leo and Mikey battle on the set of a sitcom.



bit different from *Streets of Rage*. When you play *TMNT* you have to get in that rhythm.”

COIN MUNCHER NO MORE

The dual boss fight with Dirtbag and Groundchuck reveals another concession to modern design trends over classic beat-'em-ups: players are able to revive each other when they deplete all of their health instead of immediately losing a life, a similar mechanic to co-op FPS games like *Left 4 Dead*. The developers demonstrate a similar commitment to anti-frustration changes in the way basic attacks function. Lavigne and Major describe the subtle tweaks they've made to attack hitboxes, a “slight homing” that should make *Shredder's Revenge* feel better to play than its arcade ancestors. In the original titles, the Turtles had to line up perfectly with their opponents on the Z-axis for attacks to land, an idiosyncrasy of early 2.5D design sensibilities. The more generous attack hitboxes of *Shredder's Revenge* bring its feel more in line with the feel of modern 3D action games. In other words, if you whiff, you've no one to blame but yourself.

This early look convinces me that *Shredder's Revenge* is ready to deliver on its promise of TMNT arcade goodness. It nails the retro look and style, and modern additions like online multiplayer, a story campaign, and light progression elements strike me as thoughtful choices to ease the beat-'em-up's transition from arcade cabinets to homes. As the demo plays out, part of me is already back at Papa Passero's pizzeria, seeing how far I can get on a pocket full of change. There's still a magic to nostalgia like that – especially when you can summon it up on your PC. ■

STAT SHEET

Let's break down each character's fighting style in Shredder's Revenge



DONATELLO

He's the slowest attacker of the group, but the long range of his bō staff ensures he can still get the hits in.



MICHELANGELO

The opposite of Donnie – his nunchaku are super fast, but he needs to get in close to hit with them.



LEONARDO

With his dual swords, Leonardo achieves a balance of strength, speed, and range – he's the blue-masked Mario of the group.



RAPHAEL

With his dual sai and anger management problems, Raph hits like a truck – but, like Mikey, he has a short range.



APRIL O'NEIL

An ace reporter needs to be fast to chase stories – but a microphone isn't the best weapon, so her damage is low.



MASTER SPLINTER

Decades of wisdom help him hit hard, but decades of arthritis make him pretty slow.

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DUE SOUTH



This stunning point-and-click parable isn't the next Kentucky Route Zero – it's the first **NORCO**

By Alexis Ong



Norco

N

orco is a many-headed creature – a narrative hydra of place, personhood, nostalgia, and

spirituality. But to start with the basics, it's a real Louisiana town named for the New Orleans Refining Company, a monumental piece of psychogeographical storytelling, and in February 2022, I'm ready to call it my game of the year. Note: there will be some spoilers for the game from this point onward.

The tiny dev collective Geography of Robots has called *Norco's* style 'petroleum blues', a nod to the area's relationship with the oil corporation that has defined both the town and the environmental decline that colours its existence. The game pointedly avoids the disaster porn and fetishisation that tend to dominate media portrayals of the Deep South, and while a big part of *Norco* revolves around grief and trauma, it's also full of rousing punk momentum channeled from the DIY music scene. The result is nothing short of incredible.

Norco is a bristling pastiche of Louisianan references, pop culture, and satirical moments distilled into a point-and-click pixel art adventure. The townscape and Greater New Orleans area take the form of distant highways, refinery stacks, and familiar snapshots of suburbia; impossibly careful, subtle dithering imbues each scene with warmth and

life. *Norco* isn't just for Louisianans, though residents will get a kick out of seeing real locations like Kenner's Esplanade Mall – closed due to Hurricane Ida and now being repurposed for political events – rebirthed as the Promenade Mall. Despite its hyperlocality, *Norco* has a universal reach that touches on widespread issues like the gig economy and automation. For starters, the non-descript bar Saint Somewhere is an instantly recognisable fixture of gentrifying neighbourhoods across the US.

On the surface, its story is simple – Kay is returning home after roaming around post-apocalyptic America doing piecemeal jobs, hitching rides, and fighting in fragmented militias. Her mother Catherine has died of cancer, which means reconnecting with her fragile younger brother. The player alternates between Kay and Catherine to uncover something strange and sinister in their hometown, culminating in a fascinating exploration of faith and identity. But while *Norco* is most obviously about external destruction and decay – the oil corporation's environmental harm is critical to the story but overwhelmingly dominated its media coverage – it's also about so, so much more.

BUMMER VIBES

If *Norco's* aesthetic is 'petroleum blues' then its existential milieu can only be described as 'bummer vibes'. Creator Yuts, who was born and raised in Norco, began working on the beginnings of the project in 2015

BELOW: Infiltrating the refinery requires an invigorating bit of turn-based combat.

as a series called *Bummer* – a handful of short films and an experimental sidescroller starring *Norco's* robot Million, with original music by *Norco* collaborators Gewgawly I and Andy Gibbs from sludge metal band Thou. "The game was going to be *Bummer 4* where it was just going to be like a short little vignette," says Yuts. "So yeah, bummer vibes is the word."

Today *Norco* has become a small but mighty sensation in the indie game world, winning the first ever Games Award at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2021. Geography of Robots isn't just Yuts anymore, either – it includes musician Gewgawly I, artist Jesse Jacobi, sound designer fmAura and coder/designer Aaron Gray; orbiting this core are other collaborators like Yuts' sister, who's helping to produce the artbook. Jacobi, who comes from a traditional painting background, took to pixel art so fast that Yuts redrew and replaced all of *Norco's* older art last December to maintain a cohesive aesthetic.





“I USED TO BOOT UP KINGDOM HEARTS AND JUST PRETEND TO COEXIST IN THOSE SPACES”

Gray brought some of his gaming favourites to the table, namely *Undertale*'s use of humour and pacing. “The way they use combat more as a narrative device than as a skill-test is a philosophy we’ve stuck to for various parts of the game,” he

ABOVE: A couple of Garretts in their natural habitat, playing videogames.

IN MEMORY OF CROUTON

A feline friend lives on in the game



Norco is an informal tribute to Yuts' late cat Crouton, who initially only appeared at the bookstore in the early versions of the game. After he passed away from kidney failure, Crouton materialised all over *Norco* – keep an eye out for him as you explore the game.

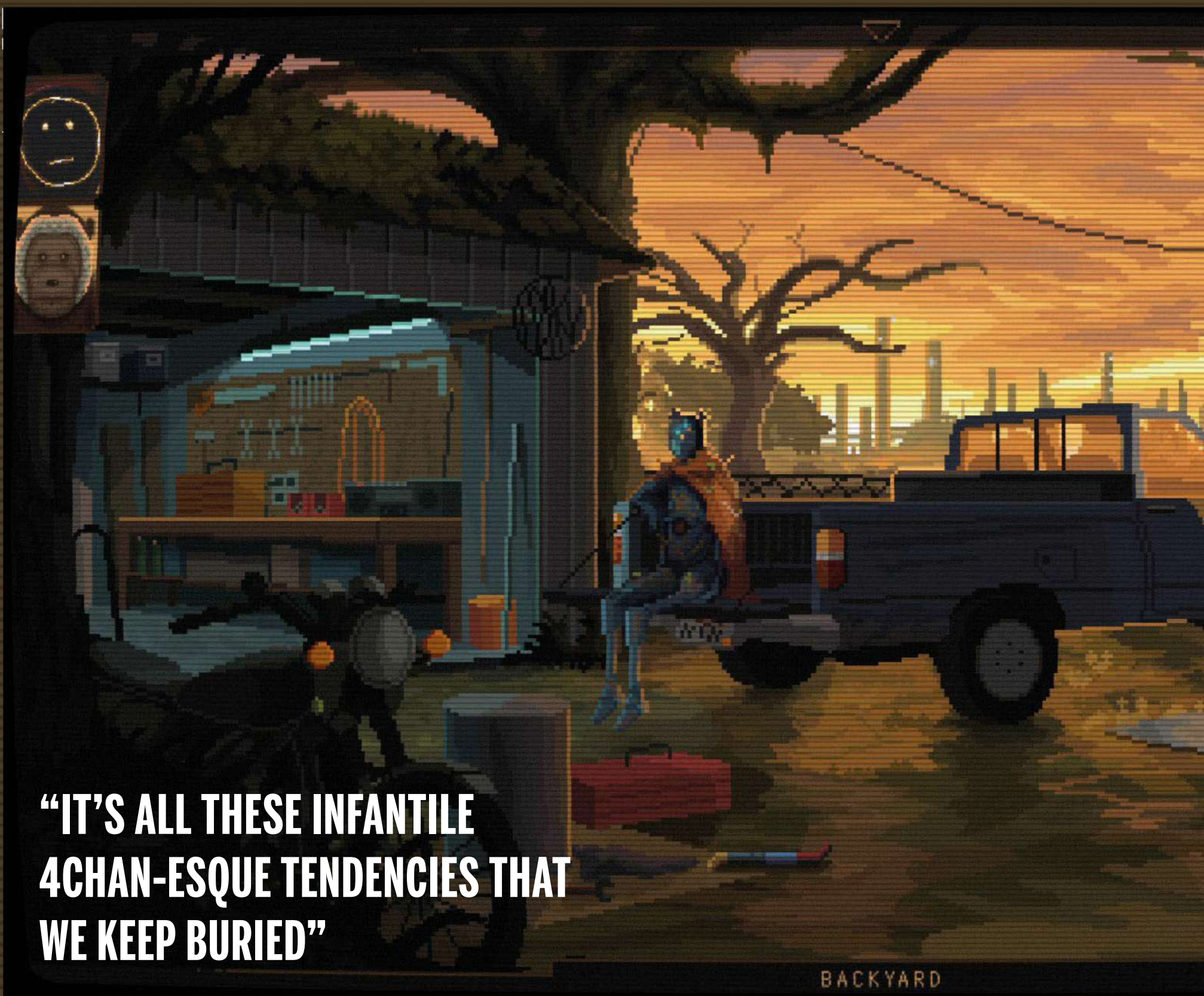
says. Yuts wrote an exchange between two characters about their favourite game *Fantasy Horse 6* after being inspired by Gray's love of *Kingdom Hearts* (as well as weird 2.5D platformer *Tomba! 2*). “I used to boot up *Kingdom Hearts* when I was a youngun and just pretend to coexist in those spaces with these fun characters,” says Gray. “I feel like *Norco* has a similar vibe.”

Norco's characters are lively and beautifully written, but infused with a pervasive sadness that brings us back to bummer, which sits in my head like a mantra throughout the game. It's not as bleak as 'depression', but a very nuanced form of disappointment with a hint of playfulness. The word comes from the old German word 'bummler', which means 'loafer'. In a modern American context it took on more antisocial connotations, and can be used interchangeably as a noun and a verb. It's also a great way to understand the Garretts – a cult of teen malcontents who form the backbone of the story.

STEAMED PUNKS

Norco comes from the same DNA that you'll find in DIY music scenes and punk collectives – a formative part of Yuts' youth and several others in the collective. “The informal nature of DIY punk as well as... almost a proto-internet of zine exchanges and informal and esoteric knowledge in those spaces was something that carried over into the game,” Yuts says, explaining where he first shared his art. Punk subcultures are directly referenced in the game world, like a book called *Crisis LARPing* that chronicles the early days of disaster tourism before “collapse became the zeitgeist”.

There's nothing that delves more into this rich ecology of subcultures than the game's introduction of the Garretts – blue-shirted boys who answer to a sociopathic pseudo-religious leader named Kenner John. Their home base is the abandoned Promenade Mall, where they wander its hallways reading, playing videogames, doomsscrolling, and bickering among themselves. The



“IT’S ALL THESE INFANTILE 4CHAN-ESQUE TENDENCIES THAT WE KEEP BURIED”

➤ Garretts are working on something important – something that John has promised them – while the rest of the town (particularly the patrons at Saint Somewhere) derides them as “mall Nazis”.

“There’s the whole rift between the Garretts and what they call ‘the scum’, which are basically crustpunks and DIY punks, who they don’t like,” Yuts explains. “The insular, often small-minded nature of those scenes... is worth analysing and critiquing [and] is incorporated into the game, but it also in certain oblique ways tries to touch on the value of those kinds of scenes as we become more atomised. That there are these new emergent forms of community to be built.”

The Garretts mostly come into play in act 2 of the game, which Yuts describes as the most collaboratively-constructed part of *Norco*. Gray designed a Voice Memo mechanic and the team iterated on that idea to create a clever exploration of quarrelling social identities and performativity. It’s

ABOVE: Million sits on Catherine’s old truck, which she’s been slowly repairing

also got some of the funniest moments in the game. While a few Garretts are goofy caricatures of some of the dev team, there’s a little bit of Yuts in all of them. “It’s all of these infantile 4chan-esque tendencies that we keep buried in our personalities,” he says. “This was a way of exorcising those things.”

Some of these emergent Garrett-like communities coalesce around faith – a huge social and cultural pillar for folks in the south. And while Kay goes through a very personal spiritual, quasi-religious journey, Yuts deliberately avoids offering the player any crumbs of objective truth. But he did still weave

MEET THE LOCALS

The colourful cast of Norco



KEITH
An old friend of Catherine’s who looks like he’d be right at home in a Tarantino flick.



TROY
An example of your friendly neighbourhood asshole who’s having a rough patch.



DALLAS
Catherine’s mysterious fellow gig worker with a soft spot for bolero ties and moustaches.



BRETT LEBLANC
A washed-up PI with an incredible office toilet who watches over the Madère family.



pieces of his Catholic upbringing into his work. “If you try to over-secularise your life and your community, and you lose the rootedness, and the kind of folkways that religion offers,” he says, “then when you return to it, you lose a lot of its material application, and it becomes what you see with the Garretts... just this bizarre perversion of what it should be.”

For all their impotence, the Garretts are in many ways the true protagonists of the game. Yuts didn’t want to make a didactic narrative around these desperate, problematic little losers. “I wanted them to be more or less identifiable sympathetic characters,” he says. “I tried to avoid any kind of binary thinking when it comes to that stuff. The Garretts’ place in the larger world is most evident towards the end of the game when a bunch of hipster partygoers – gathered to watch a Garrett-created spectacle of epic proportions – reflect on what the Garretts have managed to accomplish. These punks are like,

BELOW: A caricature of Yuts as a Garrett – his conversation partner is modelled after co-designer Aaron Gray.

“We’ve just been drinking and hanging out doing the same shit,” says Yuts. “And so in a way it’s like, respect for these kids. Maybe we’re more confused than they are.”

IT’S A MATERIAL WORLD

Perhaps the most significant impact of *Norco* as a game (and a piece of interactive art) is its place in a small but vital group of hyperlocal narrative-driven point-and-click games – yes, *Kentucky Route Zero* included – that focus on the material world: class and social and economic issues that define distinct regions and industries across the US. This started to feel like a trend with *Night in the Woods*, which came out in 2017, and reached peak hype around 2020 with the final acts of *Kentucky Route Zero*.

Kentucky Route Zero is doubtless a landmark game, but it’s also been an exhausting point of reference for *Norco*: the default framing being that *Norco* is the next *KRO*. It’s easy marketing for a game with so much to say, and it feels like games critics and fans haven’t yet cultivated better ways to talk about this sub-genre. Yuts played the first part of the first chapter of *KRO* and stopped, partially because he didn’t want to deal with the anxiety of influence. “I don’t think it’s an unreasonable comparison to make,” he says. “But I do see *Norco* as very different mechanically, thematically and everything else.”

If there wasn’t a distinct movement around hyper-local material games, back when *KRO* ended, there should be one now with *Norco*. “I think people are

exhausted by the alienation and the dematerialisation of the internet, and I think there is kind of a new emergent regionalism as well as a new kind of emergent sincerity that I can kind of see in my filter bubble,” says Yuts. If collapse already became the zeitgeist years ago, perhaps this emergent sincerity is simply the result of younger generations’ increasing desperation and frustration with climate change, widening class divides, and virulent technocapitalism. It’s not romantic to be cynical and disaffected when we still have the power to do something about it, at the very least, in our own backyards.

However we come to talk about games like *Norco*, I don’t think they need a quirky catch-all ‘-punk’ label. “It’s like advertising, to construct some kind of identity that stands against [something] kind of just makes you seem like you’re even more psyop’d than everyone else,” says Yuts wryly. “I’m not even interested in trying to construct some kind of outward facing identity that seems subversive or something.”

For now, *Norco* has been a way to make sense of his relationship to his hometown, his home state, and even his old faith. It’s been a way to make sense of Louisiana as a region and a cultural identity. And even if you’ve never been to Louisiana, one thing is certain – *Norco* is a testament to the transformative power of politics in art, and proof that even in the midst of the world falling apart, games remain potent vectors for love and humour in the most unexpected places. ■

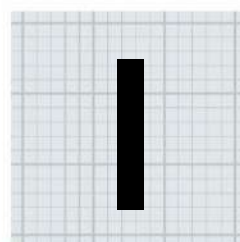




THE MAKING OF SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY

As the series' return sneaks up on us, we debrief
Sam Fisher's finest outing with its creators

By Robert Zak



In a nocturnal world of oily shadows, where darkness cuts into damp surfaces illuminated by solitary swinging lightbulbs, the green-goggled man is king. By the time the third entry in the *Splinter Cell* series, *Chaos Theory*, was released in 2005, we were already well acquainted with Sam Fisher's skill set; with just a year between this and his previous outing, we thought we knew what to expect, and expectations were high.

But in that short time between the two games, the industry straddled a technological revolution like Sam Fisher straddles a narrow corridor

with his split-jump; unthinkable things became possible through untapped tech like normal mapping and HDR lighting, playing right into – while also shaping – Ubisoft's vision for *Chaos Theory*. This wouldn't just be the third iteration of an already excellent series, but one of the greatest stealth games of all time.

After *Pandora Tomorrow* was made by Ubisoft Shanghai, development on the third game returned to where it all began – Ubisoft Montreal. The focus at this time was on making games work on the original Xbox, and the presence of former Nvidia chip designer Danny Lepage as a programmer on the game meant the team had insider knowledge on how to maximise the console's graphical horsepower (and in turn not restrict the PC version).

» “Danny understood from a deep engineering perspective how the Xbox video card worked, unlocking some of the potential for shaders, normal maps, things like that,” says the game’s lead designer Clint Hocking. “None of us had ever seen a normal map before. John Carmack was still writing forum posts trying to describe it. Then when we started to see that stuff we were like, ‘Oh my God, this looks amazing!’ It totally upended our understanding of what game visuals could be.”

CONTROLLED CHAOS

Normal maps, which ‘unflatten’ textures by giving them the illusion of depth and distorted reflections from light sources, became a must for *Chaos Theory*. Meanwhile, the team’s rendering framework – facilitated by the power of DirectX 9 – was so powerful at rendering reflection effects that it set something of an elemental theme for the entire game: water. “The reflections were so unique that we felt they could become part of the game’s identity, the same way that shadow casting was an identity of the original *Splinter Cell*,” producer Mathieu Ferland tells me.

Chaos Theory foregrounds its aquatic theme right from the start – a lighthouse off the coast of Peru where a computer programmer is being held hostage. Weaving your way through a cave system glistening with moisture, you emerge into spitting weather conditions, at which point Sam’s distinctive rubberised stealth suit

takes on a glossy sheen (mercifully, not a factor in your visibility to enemies). During this mission, you can see enemies through the condensation-blurred glass at the top of the lighthouse, and go through damp tunnels where the walls glisten with humidity and look so coarse that you feel you could run your hands along their uneven surface and come away with moisture on your fingertips.

Set in the clammiest parts of New York, Japan, and areas around the South Pacific, *Chaos Theory* is a game obsessed with wetness, and takes every opportunity to show off the verisimilitude proffered by the tech

of the time, and the studio’s ability to implement them. Crucially, all these technical advancements were in service of the *Splinter Cell* stealth experience, which would also make some serious leaps in *Chaos Theory*.

SIM PULL

Clint Hocking was inspired by immersive sims, particularly *Deus Ex* and what he would in a later essay call its “meaningful agency across the narrative, progression and input levels of play”. With the series’ stealth foundations well established by 2004, Hocking saw an opportunity to start exploring some of those more ambitious design philosophies.

The last thing an unobservant guard fails to see before they die.



LESSONS IN STEALTH

The next Splinter Cell will need to build on its best tricks

THROWN OBJECTS

In *Chaos Theory*, the AI doesn’t just doggedly investigate the place a thrown object lands, but if they see it in flight they’ll first investigate where the object came from. Clever.

AI ON EDGE

The more suspicious sounds an enemy hears, the more anxious they become; do a little rustling in the bushes and they’ll dismiss it, but do it a few times and they’ll come a-snoopin’.



LIGHT LOGIC

Every source of light affects your visibility – from overhead bulbs to glowing computer screens and the intermittent red flashes of a bomb you’re trying to defuse.

REFLECTIONS

These days, games seem to have given up on making mirrors ‘work,’ but in *Chaos Theory* enemies could spot you through mirrors. Surely it’s time for mirrors to make a comeback...



ABOVE: Sam's anti-smoking campaign gets started in earnest.

FAR LEFT: *Chaos Theory* utilised breakthrough graphics tech to create a moody shadow-filled world.



At the crux of this would be doing away with the previous games' automatic game over when players would trigger alarms too many times. "It was my mandate from the very first day that there is no game over in this game," says Hocking. "The game has to carry on and it has to adapt to your actions. And that was enormously difficult. It really put a lot of pressure on the team, but thinking that way also unlocked our ability to make those things work."

This led to the rise of what Mathieu Ferland calls a 'loop of emotion': the process of keeping a player constantly engaged in a loop of slowly building tension, which may (or may not) culminate in a brief explosion of action or violence when you get spotted, which then makes way for relief when we escape or evade a scenario. Then the loop restarts and the tension builds again...

We as players had to adapt too. Without a game over to bail us out, we had to think on our feet when guards stumbled upon bodies and would start walking towards the room we were hiding in. We'd flatten ourselves against walls, try to recall escape routes through windows and vents, and rely more on specialist moves like clinging to pipes,

renowned for his experimental and often arrhythmic music that ranges from liquidy ambient beats to industrial drum & bass – was brought onboard after Ubisoft used his music for an internal gameplay video. Tobin's soundtrack was exceptional, from the disruptive snares and drum rolls that kick in when you get caught to the cool bassy twanging and spectral radio chatter of the stealth themes.

I reached out to Tobin to talk about his contribution to the game. "The motivation was to write music that was not typical for a game at the

time, in that it took its influence from both vintage film scores (like the work of Mission: Impossible theme composer Lalo Schiffrin) and what I was playing at clubs, namely d'n'b," he tells me. "The idea of music intensity adapting to gameplay was also not something that had been technically achievable to the degree

CHAOS THEORY FORCED US TO BE TRULY PRESENT THROUGH SOME SERIOUSLY STICKY SITUATIONS

split-jumps or even sacrilegiously shooting our way out of trouble. *Chaos Theory* forced us to be truly present through some seriously sticky situations.

Sound design and music helped sustain this loop, and Amon Tobin's score was integral to that. The electronic music producer –



ABOVE: Another characteristically damp assassination.

FAR RIGHT: You can remotely (but only temporarily) disable security devices and hack computers.



» we wanted at that moment. It drew out technical innovation from Ubisoft along with creative challenges, such as making sure individual layers of a composition were as musically compelling as the sum of their parts.”

STEALTH INSPECTOR

Expanding the player’s freedom also required expanding the level design. Whereas previous games offered multiple stealthy solutions for getting through a gi room or sequence, their relative linearity made it easy for the game to highlight the threats and challenges you’d face in each section. Individual missions were conveniently broken into segments separated by loading screens, effectively wiping clean whatever mess of snoozing bodies and broken lights you may have left in your wake.

In contrast, *Chaos Theory*’s maps were seamless stealth sandboxes

which had to account for the possibility that you could enter most spaces from any angle, bypass some areas altogether, or even ‘break’ the narrative flow. You could mess around with the order you did objectives, or what angle you’d approach certain scripted scenes from, and the dialogue with Headquarters would change

“ANYBODY IN THE TEAM COULD PROPOSE A CONTEXTUAL IDEA RELATED TO A SITUATION”

depending on the bespoke path you carved through a mission.

But within these sandboxes were dozens of special moments, where you could slice through a Japanese Shoji wall to grab a guard from the other side, or with a meticulously placed barrel indulge in a bit of explosive Tom Cruise-style swagger.

At one point I was shimmying along a pipe when, right on cue, a guard peered through a doorway, forcing me to instinctively hang upside-down and plip him in the face with my silencer. These moments were sporadic, but broke up the stealth flow in an extremely engaging way.

Many of these seemingly incidental moments were

handcrafted, conceived even before the levels themselves and based on a vast internal repository of stickmen. “There was this documentation where anybody in the team

could propose a contextual idea related to a situation – whether it’s upside-down interrogations or pulling an enemy over a rail,” Ferland recalls. “Those ideas were coming from stickman drawings. Even if there were multiple paths, we wanted to find a way to pull the player into those scenes.”

When I ask Hocking about his favourite level, he immediately gives me the Panamanian Bank – an early mission that sees Fisher starting out in the grounds of a palatial building, and work his way in before freely exploring its vast interior. The initial approach is classic *Splinter Cell*, as you work your way up to the roof of the building and drop in through a skylight. Once you're inside, the level becomes a maze of opportunities.

LEVEL UP

Keeping these levels seamless wasn't easy, due the lack of streaming tech built into Unreal Engine 2.5 and the high demands of normal mapping

and high-fidelity texture assets.

"Breaking the levels into small pieces was going to force them to be super linear, like there would literally only be three rooms and then another level and then three rooms and then another level. So we wouldn't even be able to make the game we wanted to make," Hocking tells me. "We had to write a streaming solution, and had programmers just work full-time so that whichever way a player took through a level, you'd move through chokepoints and they're dumping textures behind you and loading textures in front of you."

Chaos Theory was more than just the latest 'one-a-year' iteration in a

prolific Ubisoft series, it was a peak of stealth gaming. It cast a long shadow over the series, which would later water down some of its identity by opting for a more linear, fast-paced experience (more or less parallel to when *Hitman Absolution* and the *Thief* remake seemingly forgot the defining qualities of their predecessors). But now, with *Splinter Cell* set to return after a decade's hiatus, it has a chance to return to – and build on – the design ethos that made *Chaos Theory* so special.

With so much to evolve in such a short span of time, the development process took its toll on Hocking, whose obsession to deliver his vision often saw him working 80-hour weeks of his own accord. "I'd only been making games for three years. I didn't realise how much trouble I'd put myself in," he remembers. "I sometimes question whether it was really worth it. In the end I feel like it was. I'm very proud of it and it's something I'll be proud of for the rest of my life."

There's a contemplative moment of silence before Hocking adds a caveat so common among relentlessly driven creatives. "But it wasn't free," he concludes. "It wasn't free." ■

FISHER'S TIPS IN PERSUASION

Sam Fisher's dialogue when he captures an enemy is some of the sharpest in the series



THE LOGICAL PUTDOWN

Sam: Give me some intelligence or you'll be pushing up daisies in a cemetery full of guys just like you.
Guard: I don't have any intelligence.
Sam: Hey, you just called yourself stupid.

THE REMINDER WHO'S IN CHARGE

Sam: What are you doing here?
Guard: I would ask you the same.
Sam: I have a knife. You go first.

THE FAKE ORDERS FROM 'HIGHER UP'

Sam to HQ: "He's not talking, should I kill him?"
HQ to Sam: "Negative, Negative"
Sam to Guard: "OK, they say I should kill you so..."

'THIS IS JUST A DRILL SO PLAY ALONG' ROUTINE

Guard: Wait a minute, is this a training exercise?
Sam: Ugh, damn. Support! This guy knows it's an exercise, who let the cat out of the bag?

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REVIEW

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Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

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Precious item

In an industry that loves nostalgia, I think *Elden Ring* is the first time a game has actually made me feel like a kid again. I'm obsessed in a way that I haven't been since those carefree days – losing every evening to it, sneaking more boss attempts in every time I have a free minute, thinking about it whenever I'm not playing it. The kind of giddy excitement that's quite difficult to fit into an adult life with a solid eight hours sleep every night. After a strange couple of years for games (not to mention the world) it's such a welcome feeling to be sucked into something really special again. I won't say it's reignited my love of games – as jaded as I am, that fire never really flickered out – but it's certainly fuelling a fresh enthusiasm for PC gaming's future. If something this weird and idiosyncratic can be a huge hit, who knows what's around the next corner?

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**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's maidenless reviewers...



TYLER COLP
Specialist in
Hard graft
Currently playing
Elden Ring
This month
Discovered that
reviewing a FromSoft
game is the *Dark Souls*
of games journalism.



**ANNE-MARIE
COYLE**
Specialist in
Nier misses
Currently playing
Babylon's Fall
This month
Isn't angry at Platinum,
but she's certainly
disappointed.



**LINCOLN
CARPENTER**
Specialist in
Reviewing one-liners
Currently playing
Shadow Warrior 3
This month
Made some people
angry by suggesting
'Lo Wang' isn't funny.



PHIL SAVAGE
Specialist in
Light entertainment
Currently playing
Destiny 2
This month
Rushed to review the
new *Destiny* expansion
before Bungie puts it
away in a vault.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Bloody-mindedness
Currently playing
Bloodborne PSX
This month
Ignored the new
FromSoft game in
favour of a demake of
an old one. Contrarian.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Partial war
Currently playing
Total War: Attila
This month
Struggled to survive in
one of history's most
brutal periods. Yes,
worse than 2022.



A FAMILIAR RING

ELDEN RING is a Souls-like adventure on a massive scale

By Tyler Colp

FromSoftware's games, from *Demon's Souls* to *Dark Souls* to *Bloodborne*, have always quietly been open worlds. Far off castles and swamps caught your eye, you trekked towards them, fell down a hole, probably died and went looking for a new destination. They didn't need maps or icons, because their carefully crafted settings were dense with clues and lures leading to new paths and back to old locations.

Elden Ring, FromSoftware's successor to the *Souls* series, spreads the mysteries and challenges of *Dark Souls* across an open world in a more conventional sense. There are castles to infiltrate from several angles, swamps to ride through on horseback, and gargantuan beasts to chase you down. The sheer amount of freedom is a first for the series, and it results in a game packed with what's so beloved about it: idiosyncratic characters and buckets of truly horrifying monsters.

Elden Ring is bursting with familiar iconography from the *Souls* series. Not only is there a woman to level you up and a throne to usurp, there are many enemies that reference or even look and move exactly the same as ones that came before. It's distracting, and illustrates

how scattering the things I love across a new world doesn't necessarily improve them.

Even as a reprisal of what's been done before, *Elden Ring* manages to remix enough of these elements to construct a game that, like the *Souls* series, is still unparalleled. *Elden Ring* is undeniably *Dark Souls* even if I had hoped for a little more. And while that comes with some

annoying and frustrating technical problems too, it also means that it's tremendous without having to reach for anything more. And the few times it does, it soars.

SOLID FOOTING

Elden Ring's first few hours might remind you of gentler times in a game like *Breath of the Wild*, but no, FromSoftware has not abandoned its

It's bursting with familiar iconography from the *Souls* series

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open world action-RPG set in a vast, sad fantasy world

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
FromSoftware

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

REVIEWED ON
RTX 3080, Ryzen 9 3900X, 32GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
eldenring.com



traditional brutality. Because of the open world, there are opportunities to circumvent some of the third-person, hack-and-slash fights that would eviscerate you in another *Souls* game, but it's still difficult – for me, one of the most difficult FromSoftware games.

Elden Ring features the same deliberate combat that's now iconic for these types of games, except here it's fully refined. You swing, the enemy swings, and both of you can interrupt each other's attacks with acute timing. This is upended by the new weapon abilities and magic spells that introduce things like shields that deflect magic or swords that cast massive bursts of flame. The best *Elden Ring* fights, like the best *Souls* fights, ask that you study the way an enemy lunges at you and look for openings to punish them when they miss. In action, it's almost turn-based as you make your move and wait for the enemy to make theirs. *Elden Ring* is filled with encounters like this. Most of them are superb, but later in the game, some enemies and bosses come with so much health that it can be gruelling to get them down.

Elden Ring remained hostile for the 60 hours I've put into it, making the trek through it occasionally frustrating and directionless. One pocket of land might house undead soldiers who fall to pieces with a poof of magic, while another one might contain ruthless giants who can shrug off an axe cleaved into their side. I spent much of *Elden Ring* unsure of how strong my character was and where I could go. It makes sense from my character's perspective – she's intruding on the land that exiled her – but for me, inscrutable encounters with high-health enemies felt like hitting an MMO level gate, except that because this is a *Souls* game, I couldn't tell whether I was expected to spend hours mastering these fights or leave them until later.

ITEMISED LIST

Essential gear you should grab ASAP



CRAFTING KIT
Purchased from the merchant at the Church of Elleh. This let you craft arrows, bombs, poison cures, and much more.



WHETSTONE KNIFE
Located in Gatefront Ruins. Lets you apply Ashes of War – new weapon powers – at any Site of Grace.



SPIRIT CALLING BELL
Gifted by a witch early in the game at the Church of Elleh. It lets you summon ghostly buddies.



FLASK OF PHYSICK
Found in the Third Church of Marika in eastern Limgrave. Lets you brew custom potions.



Bosses are the usual mix of noble, grotesque, and sad.



FAR LEFT: I sure hope this nice lady doesn't turn out to be a hard as nails boss fight!

LEFT: Poison swamps are back.



See that castle?
You can go to it.



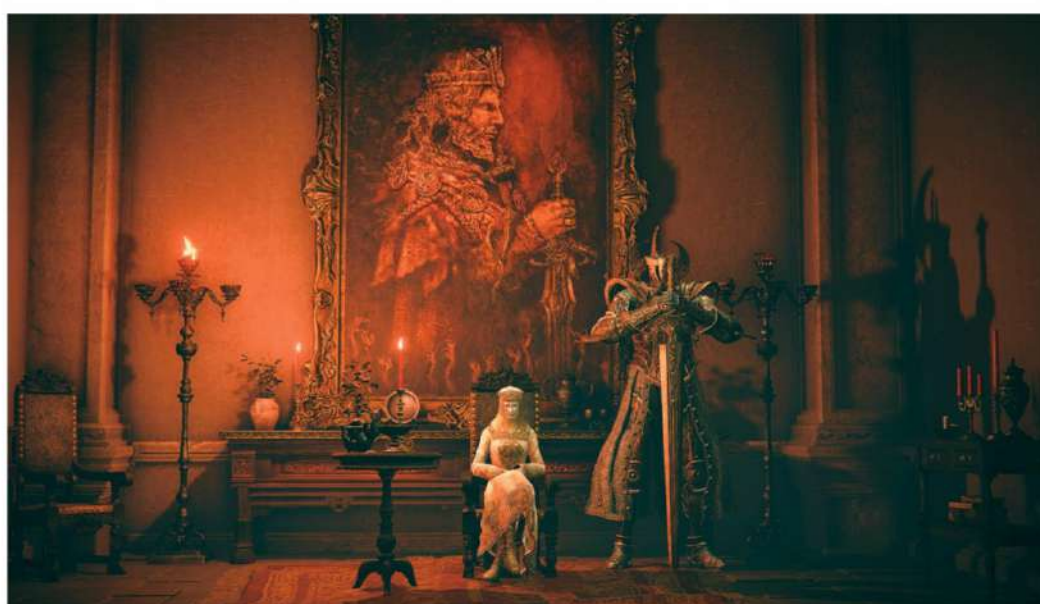
Melina joins you on your journey in the Lands Between.



RIGHT: A friendly turtle in a pope hat that teaches magic.



FAR RIGHT: Not quite a red wedding, but there is a lot of blood around here.



There are snakes as big as dragons.

» Torrent, the horse you can summon at almost any time while outside of *Elden Ring*'s delineated dungeons and caves, is part of the problem, too. It's exhilarating to gallop past massive enemies and through camps to pick up items, but sometimes the horse is required for large-scale fights against dragons and big monsters. For weaker enemies in the open world, it works fine, but certain scenarios can lead to confusion as you get pelted by unavoidable arrows and magic. Some enemies might seem like they're designed to be fought on the horse, but are much more manageable on foot, which feels antithetical to having Torrent in the first place.

A PATH NEW AND OLD

Once you understand the language of *Dark Souls*, it's clear where you should head next in its more contained world and where you shouldn't. A poison-soaked area might drain your healing resources on an initial run, but a forest nearby is full of herbs to stock up on. *Elden Ring*'s problems often have similar solutions, but because the map is so big and dense, it was hours before I understood where I was supposed to use items like anti-poison herbs and armour built to withstand magic attacks that I found.

Ruts like that are worth climbing out of to see *Elden Ring*'s most tremendous moments. In its early hours, *Dark Souls* appears to be a typical fantasy setting with skeletons and dragons, but it eventually unfolds into an hourglass world where golden cities gaze down upon flooded ruins. When *Elden Ring* isn't recreating these locations, including that very same city down to the windows, or the poison swamp, or its own vacant version of the hub area, it's utterly magnetic.

Below the Lands Between lies one of the most beautiful areas in FromSoftware's oeuvre, rivalling the sakura-hues of *Sekiro*'s final act. That's where I fought the Ancestor Spirit, a graceful, magical stag pulled from Norse mythology. In contrast to *Elden Ring*'s grotesque dragons and stoic knights, the Ancestor Spirit is otherworldly as it weightlessly glides through the air. The fight is backed by a sparse score that drives the slow

pace of the fight to give you the space to soak it up. FromSoftware games are known for difficulty, but one of the developer's greatest tricks is turning the tension on its head with a fight that's almost purely thematic, with just enough to do to keep you present. The Ancestor Spirit is like being deep into a rhythm game where the buttons melt away under

your fingertips and the music alone carries you to the end. It's nigh-transcendent, and an example of how hard *Elden Ring*'s best moments hit, when the iconography of the previous games disappears and

FromSoftware's skill at orchestrating these types of battles shines through.

The reheated boss fights from the previous games undercut the impact. Although many of them are remixed and situated in different contexts, they are all blatant nods to what came before. I fought a spinning wolf with a sword in its mouth like *Dark Souls*' Sif, I duelled a knight with the same gait as Artorias, and I barrelled through a library of minions to disrupt a floating boss that resembles Fool's Idol from *Demon's Souls*. *Dark Souls* 2 and 3 were full of references to the previous games, but neither of them promised to be a whole new universe birthed in part from the mind of a famous fantasy author.

It's exhilarating to gallop past massive enemies and through camps

SOUL SURVIVORS

Some of the weirder characters you'll meet



PRAWN GUY

He stole a necklace, but lets you buy it back. He boils prawns and sells them. An unhappy fellow.



RANNI THE WITCH

A witch that has plans for you. Though gentle, she doesn't seem like she's telling you the full truth.



WAR COUNSELOR IJI

Kind giant with a peculiar helmet. He's the only trustworthy NPC in the game; protect him!



KENNETH

Kenneth is a noble sort that asks for a favour. He appears innocent, but I don't believe him.

Elden Ring could have been anything, and yet, for an absurd amount of its length, it's disappointingly interested in reprising the *Souls* games, even if doing so puts it above so many other action RPGs.

WAITING FOR MORE

Elden Ring carries forward a lot of the things you'd expect, including rough performance on PC. Over time, it tends to intermittently stutter and slow down for brief moments, especially as you're out in the open world. I never died to a hiccup in performance, but it made me pause and restart the game fairly often to fix the issue. The day-one patch which promised to fix the issue, didn't solve it completely either. There's a 60fps lock, high RAM requirement, and limited graphics settings (you won't find DLSS or granular options for anti-aliasing). I hoped for better options and performance from a developer that's released several games on PC at this point.

Like with *Dark Souls*, though, *Elden Ring*'s technical flaws are worth putting up with and will hopefully clear up with time, either by a modder or an official patch. Every stutter is worth the idiomatic dream logic of finding a swirling portal that takes you to a hunched over beast man that begs you to feed him. FromSoftware creates transfixing fantasy worlds that leave you desperately wanting to know more about them. No other developer does it the same way, especially at this scale.

Elden Ring is junk food for FromSoftware fans. It's more of what I already adore, but family sized. It has everything that makes these games so intoxicating, and that lodges their intricate fiction into my brain. But its devotion to what came before is distracting. It dulls the impact of those moments where *Elden Ring* leaps beyond its past to demonstrate why FromSoftware's games are unparalleled by all who attempt to replicate them. As another *Souls* game, I love *Elden Ring*, but as the latest game from FromSoftware, I wanted it to dream a little bigger. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Elden Ring is a world of tremendous secrets and battles – but I wish it was a little less familiar for a *Souls* fan.

90

ALL RIGHT

For an underground adventure, **LITTLE ORPHEUS** is painfully surface-level

By Dashiell Wood

Although mobile titles can successfully survive the transition to PC, *Little Orpheus* never manages to shrug off the limitations of its original format. There may be much to appreciate in its visuals, which alone would have likely proved more than enough to liven up any commute, but when presented in anything other than bite-size chunks of portable play, the repetitive nature of its platforming becomes painfully apparent.

Set at the height of the Cold War, you play as Ivan Ivanovich, a bumbling cosmonaut who managed to cheat his way into the USSR space program. Three years ago, Ivan was sent underground on a perilous journey to assess the suitability of the Earth's crust for colonisation in *Little Orpheus*, a nuclear-powered subterranean craft. However, communication with the ship was lost, and whilst Ivan has resurfaced, the location of *Little Orpheus* remains unknown. Arrested under the suspicion of sabotaging his own expedition, Ivan is hauled into an interrogation chamber, threatened with execution, and forced to explain the whereabouts of his craft. Worse still, the arbiter of his fate, the

General, becomes increasingly impatient as the hours tick by.

This may sound like a sombre framing device for a light-hearted puzzle-platformer, but the tone is always kept upbeat. Ivan's narration follows his travels through a plethora of imaginative lands that feel right out of a children's adventure book. It's a joy to listen as he relays his tale, and even the occasional interjections from the General, who points out the glaring inconsistencies

throughout Ivan's account, are played up for laughs. The pair have a wonderful dynamic, with the General's intimidating presence serving as the perfect foil to Ivan's naïve personality. Though out of his depth, Ivan is well-intentioned, and

Lighting effects help transform most of the levels into a visual treat

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A narrative driven puzzle platformer that was originally an Apple Arcade exclusive

EXPECT TO PAY
TBC

DEVELOPER
The Chinese Room

PUBLISHER
Secret Mode

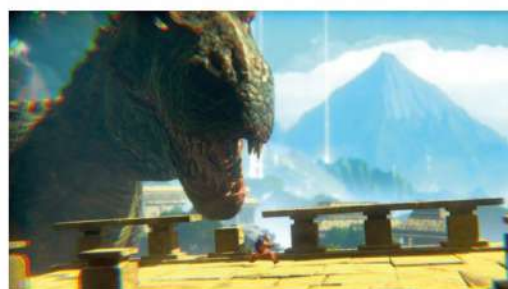
REVIEWED ON
Nvidia RTX 3060, i5-11400F, 16GB Ram

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
thechineseroom.co.uk

makes for a thoroughly charming protagonist. The presentation of both characters is elevated further by near-flawless voice performances which see almost every joke delivered with impeccable comedic timing. Even the moments of genuine tension when tempers begin to flare have a plausible gravitas.

PUZZLING PROBLEMS

A strong prismatic filter lends everything a distinctly hazy appearance, a perfect complement to the overriding fantastical atmosphere that also helps conceal some of the environment's rougher edges. There are still plenty of moments where the game's handheld roots shine through with the odd muddy texture, but the vivid colour palette and striking lighting effects help transform most of the levels into a visual treat. Sadly, the same can't be said for the character models, which seem dull, with flat lifeless eyes that become especially apparent up close. But where *Little Orpheus* truly begins to flail is in its gameplay – or, more accurately, the absence of it. Your time throughout most of its levels is spent slowly trudging towards the



TOP: How will our hero overcome this perilous obstacle? It probably involves running to the right.



Sometimes you even get to ride a boat.



TOP: The occasional platforming is basic but better than nothing.

ABOVE: Puzzles mostly involve flicking a simple switch to progress.

right side of the screen. It's fine at first, and I was initially pleased to see the strong narrative take centre stage, but in a game that takes almost five hours to complete it is simply not enough to hold anybody's interest.

The game's few platforming sections helped break up the monotonous trek to some degree, but their incredibly basic layouts never presented anything close to a challenge. They only take a few seconds to traverse and mostly boil down to hitting the jump button a few times before continuing to walk to the right. The puzzles are the same, and the even rarer stealth sections are overcome by simply waiting for enemies to turn around before continuing to walk to the right. To make matters worse, chapters are clearly padded, with set piece moments repeated multiple times until all the impact is lost.

Little Orpheus plays like a wonderful podcast stuck to a platformer trapped in the past. It feels emblematic that even the final boss fight, the apparent climax of Ivan's adventure, is yet more moving to the right. The only twist is that this time you're running. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Breathtaking vistas and a whimsical soundtrack fail to halt *Little Orpheus'* slow descent into monotony.

57



RUSHIN' ABOUT

How Ivan spends his time

60% WALKING TO THE RIGHT
Swap between different fingers while holding the button down.

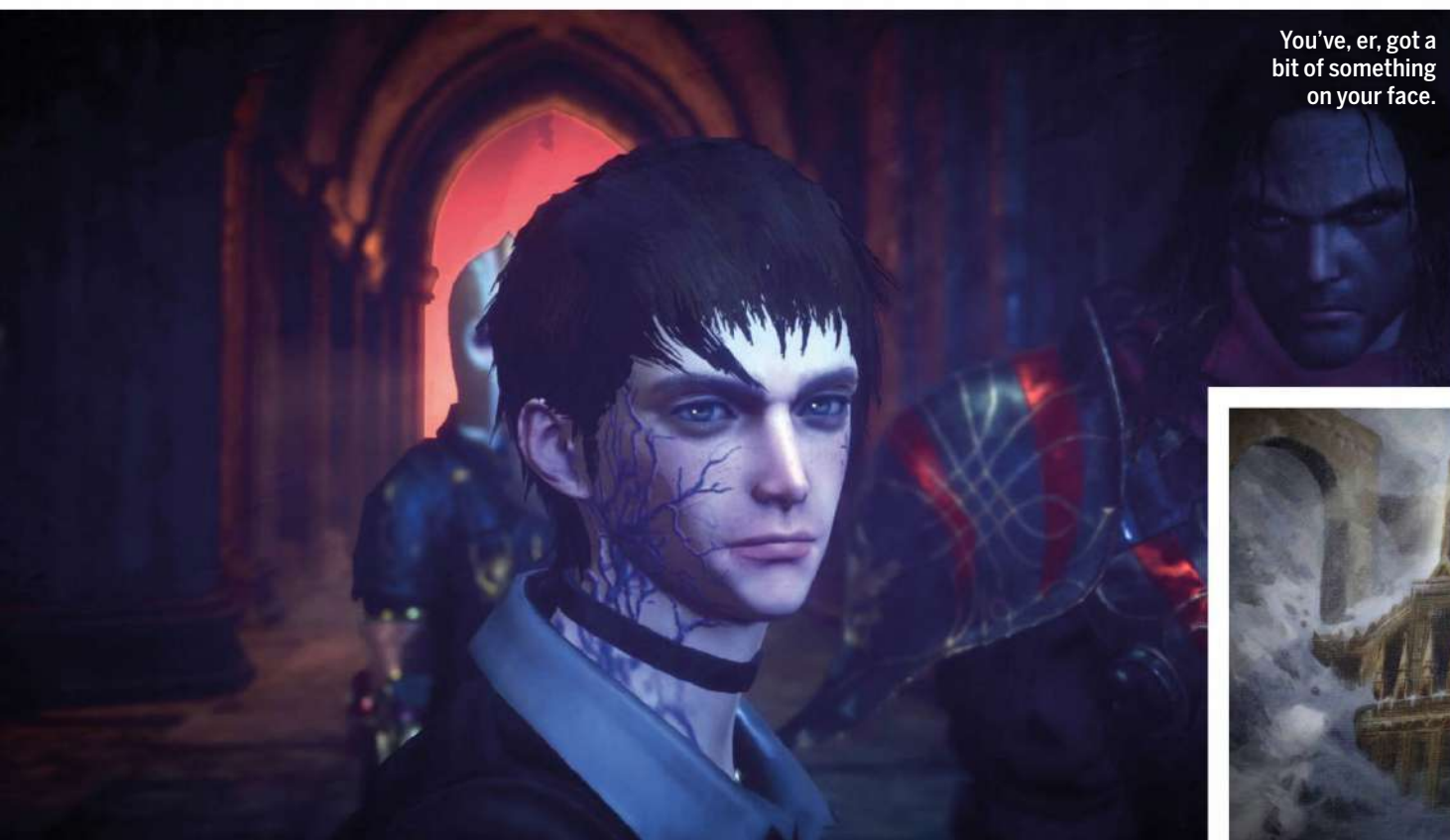
14% PLATFORMING
Treat your fingers to a trip to the space bar.



15% SOLVING PUZZLES
Stopping to flip a switch is a fun diversion.

5% EVADING ENEMIES
The only other reason to stop walking.

1% WALKING TO THE LEFT
It makes a nice change.



You've, er, got a bit of something on your face.



RIGHT: The half-baked loot system gives you very little to get excited about.

FAR RIGHT: Combat has decent foundations, but not enough substance.



There are some creative monsters, but the story is bland.



NOT NIER ENOUGH

There's precious little Platinum magic in **BABYLON'S FALL**

By Anne-Marie Coyle

Platinum Games' inspiration for its first foray into the live-service market is certainly an ironic one. The once great and revered Babylonian empire, now reduced to ruins, serves as a fitting metaphor for the game itself. Far from boasting the high-octane combat, unique characters, and fascinating worlds that the studio is synonymous with, *Babylon's Fall* crumbles under the weight of repetitive gameplay and prioritisation of paywalls over players.

You play as a Sentinel, a prisoner forced to scale the Ziggurat – based on the mythical Tower of Babel – at the behest of your Neo-Babylonian masters. Equipped with a mysterious artefact called a Gideon Coffin, you ascend the structure's many floors, battling blue-hued enemies known as the Gallu. It's not the most inspired of stories, but it does serve as a mildly entertaining means of funnelling you from one area to the next, even if your mute hero does feel wholly insignificant to the events that unfold.

The game's starting location, Sentinel Force HQ, serves as a hub area for the usual live service shenanigans of totting up daily logins, scouting for party members, and grinding for slightly better gear.

Babylon's Fall offers nothing in the way of sidequests until you've ascended several of the Ziggurat's floors. This forces you to replay the main quests if you're looking for better loot. But with a woeful lack of variety in terms of gear, unlocks ultimately feel limited and unrewarding, meaning there's little incentive to embark on quests once, let alone go back for another round.

WHAT GOES UP

While it feels far removed from the highly polished *Bayonetta* and *Nier: Automata*, the combat still holds Platinum's penchant for flair. Your Gideon Coffin allows you to wield four weapons at once. Two are slotted for physical attacks (one for light attacks, the other heavy) and the other two weapons are for magical

attacks. Dealing magical damage depletes your spirit meter; this is also drained when you dodge, adding an extra tactical element to encounters as you balance your offensive and defensive capabilities.

Your Gideon Coffin allows you to wield four weapons at once

There's a considerable challenge offered throughout, and even though you can, it's not recommended that you tackle *Babylon's Fall* solo. Levels consist of large waves of

formidable enemies, and their sheer number alone makes being a one-Sentinel band problematic. Teaming up allows you to complete

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A forgettable live service offering from a developer that can do far better

EXPECT TO PAY
£60

DEVELOPER
Platinum Games

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-11700K,
GeForce RTX 3070,
16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
[platinumgames.com/
games/babylons-fall](https://platinumgames.com/games/babylons-fall)

levels with relative ease. However, if you don't have a ready-made party, the quiet servers can make finding potential comrades difficult, particularly in the game's later stages.

Each floor of the tower is distinctly different from the last in terms of style but not in substance, and the game gets repetitive remarkably quickly. Part of the problem with *Babylon's Fall* is that there isn't even enough not to like; there's just not enough full stop. The game's three class options merely serve to determine your starting weapon, and as fun as combat is, it's let down by a lack of variety when it comes to customising your playstyle.

Although you can utilise a lot of weaponry at once, your choices are limited. It's largely a case of if you've seen one sword you've seen 'em all as, when it comes to individual weapons, most are just different colour variations of the same basic blueprint. Indeed, any effort to inject variety through weapon crafting, Gideon Coffin customisation, and side missions offers much too little and comes far too late.

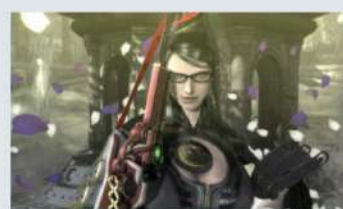
There's an overarching sense of a game that feels unfinished, with live service elements like battle passes and premium accessories taking priority over variety, meaningful progression and, ultimately, player enjoyment. Take these aspects out, and you're left with a solid combat system that lacks the depth needed to go the distance and a game that's remarkable only for its blandness. Its limited offerings and dull exterior could be overlooked were this a free-to-play title, but at a £60, it certainly doesn't deliver anything resembling the rich experience that its steep price tag suggests. ■

SHINY AND CHROME

Much better games from Platinum



METAL GEAR RISING: REVENGEANCE
Raiden found redemption for *Metal Gear Solid 2* in this.



BAYONETTA
This wicked witch brings over-the-top stylish action to a whole new level.



VANQUISH
A fast and frenetic sci-fi action shooter that's barrels of fun with a gripping story to boot.

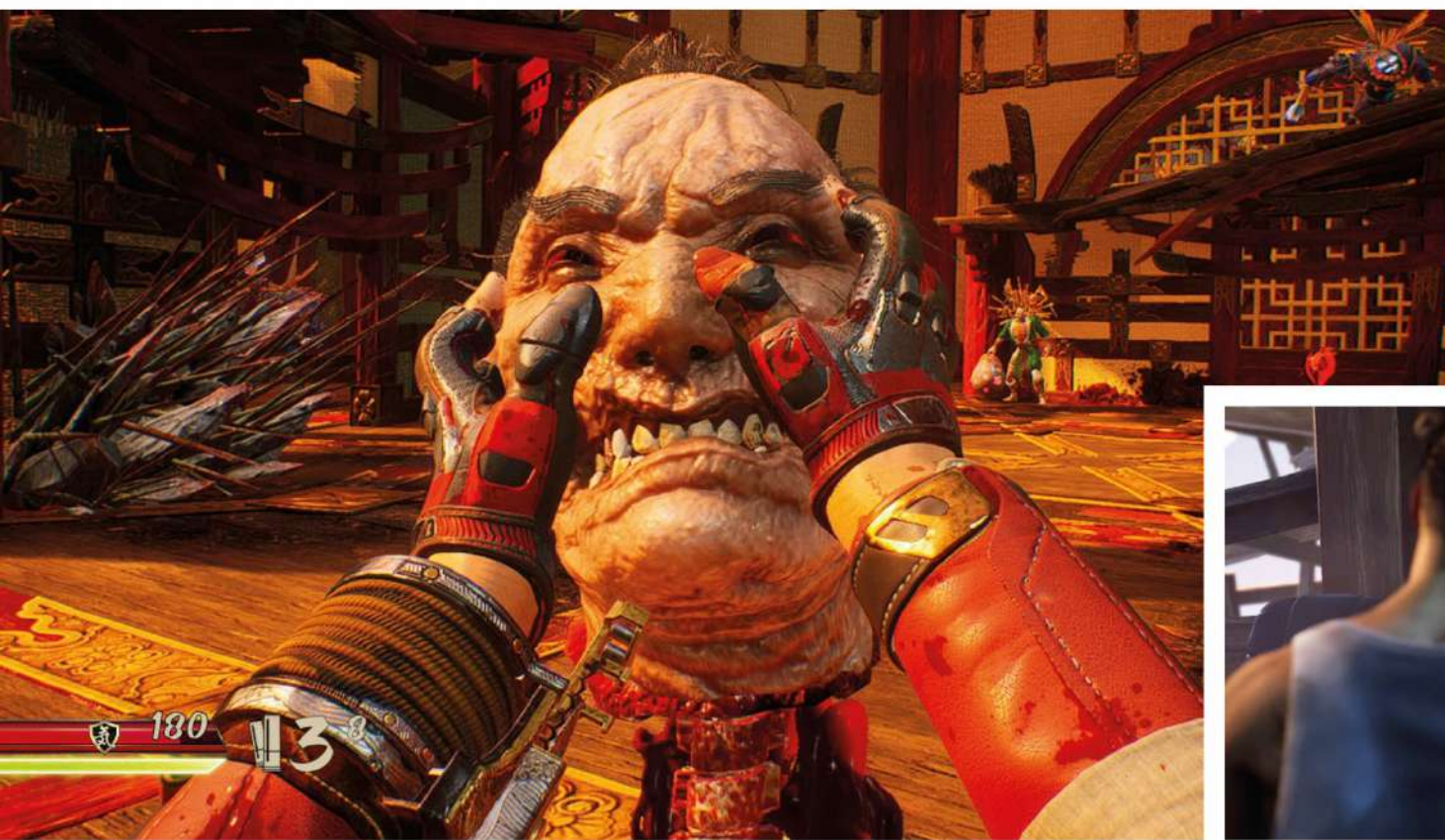


NIER: AUTOMATA
Get all the feels with this role-playing adventure starring androids.

PC GAMER VERDICT

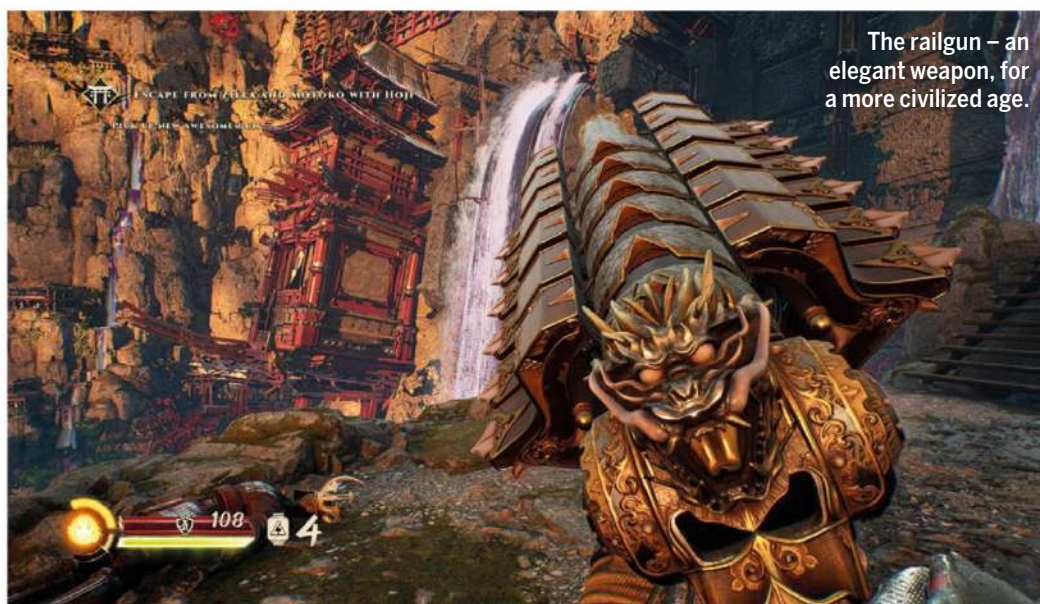
Babylon's Fall is an overpriced game with a solid combat system that's buried under a mountain of banality.

45



RIGHT: Environmental hazards can be turned against Wang's foes.

BELOW: Surprisingly, this actually is just a flesh wound.



The railgun – an elegant weapon, for a more civilized age.



LO WANG-ING FRUIT

Boomer shooter **SHADOW WARRIOR 3** revives a hero we never needed

By Lincoln Carpenter

Shadow Warrior 3 is a fast-paced FPS for adult-aged children. It stars East Asian caricature and human dick joke Lo Wang, whose main character trait is that he sucks. He's an onslaught of crap one-liners and innuendos, the kind of man who's rating how bangable the game's only woman is within moments of meeting her. He's the answer to a question nobody asked: what if Deadpool was racially insensitive, and you had to be him for many hours?

While the legacy of the original 1997 game is better left forgotten, I'd like plenty about *Shadow Warrior 3*'s throwback shooter rhythm if it was anywhere else. Its singleplayer

campaign of combat arenas is a perpetual parkour of air dashing and wall-running, all while rotating through different flavours of carnage as each weapon's dwindling ammo count allows.

The arsenal ranges from standards like a truly satisfying shotgun to more unconventional implements, like a shuriken-shooting crossbow. A quick-recharging chi blast and a retractable grappling hook help provide space when it's needed. For ammo and health, enemies themselves are the most reliable refill options: melee attacks from Lo Wang's katana generate ammo on hits and kills, while a finisher meter enables executions for a health refill and a bonus effect unique to each enemy type. Lots of notes taken from 2016's *Doom* here.

Those finishers provide an extra strategic layer: the most basic enemies will grant quick bonuses like temporary increases to max health. Larger enemies will instead provide a 'gore tool': a disposable, high-damage weapon refashioned from the yokai's corpse, like a hammer torn from an oni's meaty lower spine. It produces some enjoyable tension – cashing in for a gore tool means being briefly unable to grab a health refill. It's a fun balance to find, while it lasts.

Hours in, the momentum crumbles. Character and weapon upgrades increase HP and ammo

drops, flattening the rhythm of in-combat decision making. And *Shadow Warrior 3* doesn't have any ideas for ramping up difficulty beyond throwing out ever higher

numbers of its beefy demons. Every combat encounter becomes a bloated slog of bullet sponge enemies.

QUIPPED APART

Of course, by this point, Lo Wang has spent hours making the experience intolerable. Any small success is punished by having to hear Lo Wang's god-awful banter. Every victory carries a danger of triggering

Every combat encounter becomes a slog of bullet sponge enemies

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A throwback shooter with an outdated punchline protagonist

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Flying Wild Hog

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7 8700K,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
970, 32GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
shadowwarrior.com

Wang-based innuendo. Every kill is a chance to hear him sing Another One Bites the Dust, except it's funny because he says douchebag in it.

He's a cheap caricature – dulled down by a reboot since his first incarnation in the original 1997 *Shadow Warrior*, but still unavoidably a Western imagining of a funny Asian man as an excuse for dick jokes and an incredibly silly accent.

At the very least, for the first time, his accent isn't being performed by a white man. It's not much of a victory, though, when the soundtrack is a Frankenstein's monster of Asian musical stereotypes, sampling that one kung fu fighting riff and ending each combat encounter with a goofy-ass gong hit.

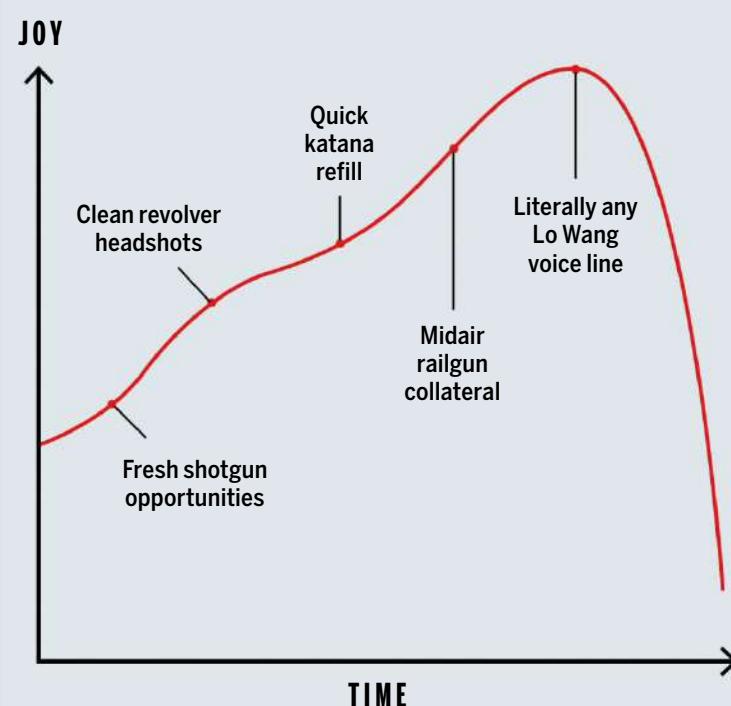
Meanwhile, *Shadow Warrior 3*'s idea of Japan is an unbroken sea of pagodas and Buddha statues, nestled in a landscape of mountain pillars that looks inspired by a distinctly Chinese karst range. It feels like just as much of an exaggerated parody as the soundtrack, or Lo Wang himself. No game needs true-to-life accuracy. But it shouldn't leave me wondering, again, whether someone even thought to involve any of the real people from the real places being reduced to a hollow fantasy land.

I don't think *Shadow Warrior 3* cares. It's content with a Polish studio's homogeneous, nonspecific idea of what 'Asian' looks like. It's comfortable knowing plenty of players will, even in the wake of a global rise in anti-Asian xenophobia, enjoy it without discomfort. After all, Lo Wang is the hero here.

In one cutscene, the camera pulls back to reveal Lo Wang's censored groin. Then he farts. That pretty much sums it all up. ■

THRILL KILLER

The typical timeline of Wang combat



PC GAMER VERDICT

Shadow Warrior 3 buries a fun shooter so deep in muck that it's not worth dirtying your hands with its utter nonsense.

52

SLAY QUEEN

With **DESTINY 2: THE WITCH QUEEN**, Bungie delivers its best expansion to date

By Phil Savage

Since its release, *Destiny 2* has been cursed to reinvent itself with each expansion. Starting with *Forsaken*, and through to 2020's *Beyond Light*, Bungie has overhauled every aspect of the game multiple times – weapons, armour, abilities, activities – each solving some issues, but introducing new problems that inevitably led to the cycle repeating. No matter what changes were made, *Destiny 2* always felt a few major tweaks away from being truly brilliant.

If *The Witch Queen* does one thing right – and, in fact, it does many – it's that it brings a sense of consistency and stability to the game. It adds new features, yes, but they're all enhancements and progressions of systems and ideas introduced in *Beyond Light*. That rare sense of continuity allows *The Witch Queen* to instead stand out in a more meaningful way: by being *Destiny 2*'s best expansion. Finally, that future is here.

The centrepiece is the campaign, which for the first time in *Destiny 2*'s history is itself a compelling reason to recommend this expansion. Previously, *Destiny 2* campaigns were little more than a path into the endgame – a handful of short missions, linked by rigidly templated repeatable activities and open world busywork. Here, though, it feels like the main attraction.

Each of its eight lengthy missions is full of personality, progressing the

story through a series of standout encounters and the occasional surprise. It starts as you assault a Cabal base on Mars – recently returned after being, er, borrowed by the Darkness – in order to fire yourself out of a cannon onto the titular Witch Queen's ship. From there, you discover a portal into her Throne World, a sort of spooky alternate dimension made into a physical manifestation of its owner's personality.

What does the Throne World of the Hive god of cunning look like?

HIVE MIND

What does the Throne World of the Hive god of cunning look like? Swamps, mostly, that border an enormous ivory castle. We've seen Hive architecture plenty before, and while the broad motifs are all still in place, Savathûn's ostentatious taste ensures it doesn't feel like you're retreading old ground. The aesthetic ties into the story, too. Pretty soon after arriving you find that Savathûn

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Live service shooter
Destiny 2's fourth expansion

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Bungie

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Ryzen 7 3700X, 32GB RAM, RTX 3080Ti

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bungie.net

now possesses the Light – the same space magic responsible for most of your powers. Discovering how this happened is the driving motivation of the new campaign.

As a longtime player, I'm used to feeling let down by the delivery of *Destiny*'s story. But here, the work spent making Savathûn feel like a threat over the last year-and-a-bit of seasonal stories has really paid off, and the twists along the way feel appropriately big and dramatic. Finally, Bungie is making good use of the fact Lance Reddick voices one of the game's main characters.

The gunplay is great too, of course. That's always been one of *Destiny 2*'s great strengths, and the campaign's encounter design capitalises on it well. I've heard that, on normal difficulty, *The Witch Queen*'s campaign is no pushover. But I played on Legendary – a new difficulty mode that hard caps your power level below the mission requirement, and adds new modifiers and challenge elements. It feels well-tuned for anyone with a decently filled Vault and a working knowledge of armour mods. Plenty of harder encounters forced me to engage with *Destiny 2*'s buildcrafting in a way that's rarely the case outside of the hardest endgame activities. It gives the complexity of the many ability systems, weapon perks, and mods a chance to shine.

INTO THE VOID

Inevitably my run through the Legendary campaign ended in me heavily investing in the new Void 3.0 subclasses. Rather than a completely new system, this is a rework of Void ability trees to match last year's Stasis abilities, using Aspects and Fragments to create heavily customisable builds around a handful of Void-specific keywords. As a Warlock main, my main keyword is Devour, which regenerates health on kills. It always came in clutch, but now it's more than just an isolated

POINT OF ORIGIN What the new Origin Traits do, and where to get them



ONE QUIET MOMENT

Source: Crucible
Increased reload speed when out of combat. So rarely useful in Control.



LAND TANK

Source: Psi-Ops Battlegrounds
Final blows give you damage resistance. Like Rampage, but for not dying.



INVADER TRACKER

Source: Gambit
Shoot a Gambit invader and they'll be marked for your team.



VEIST STINGER

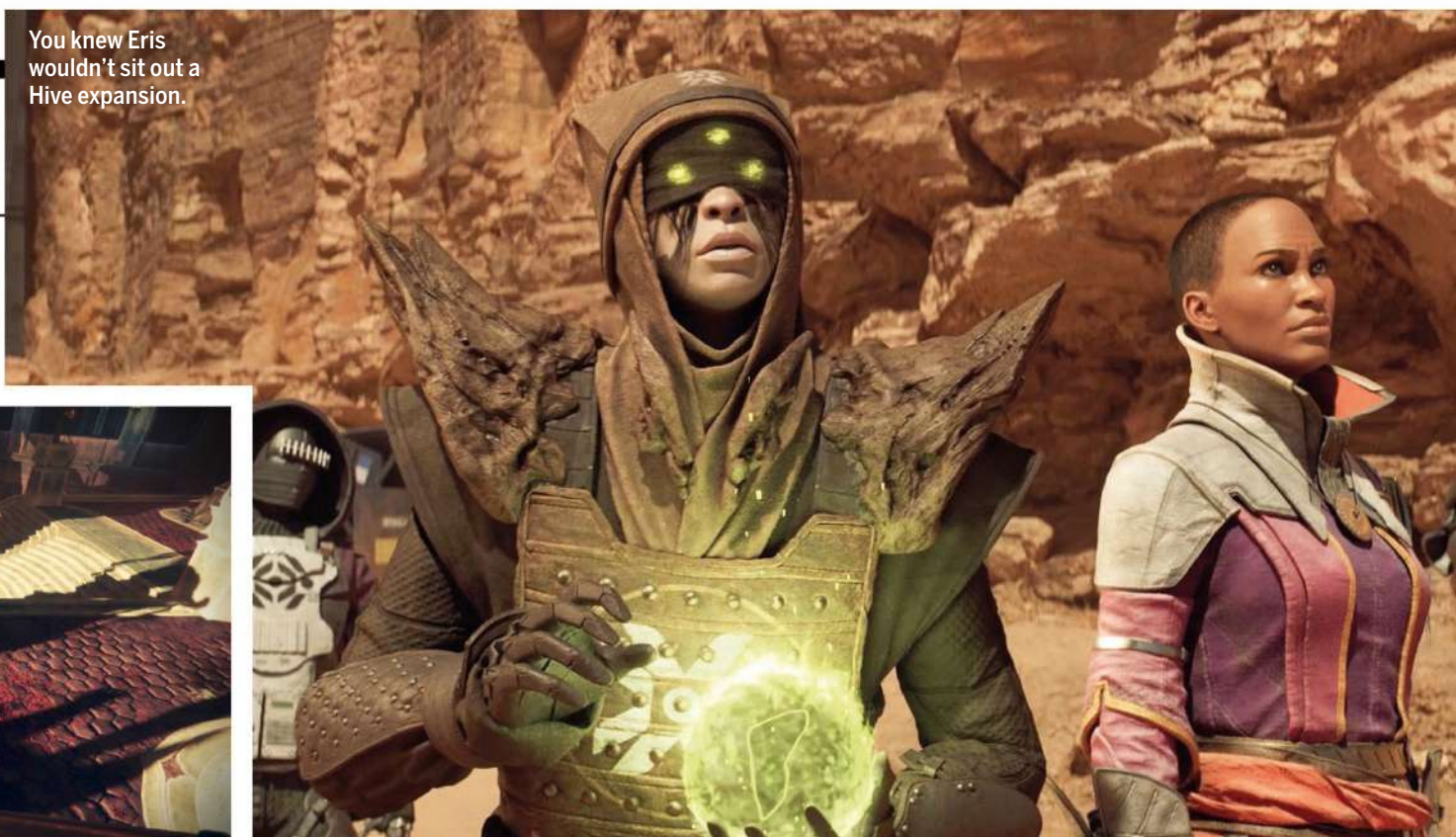
Source: World Loot
Damage an enemy for a small chance to refill the magazine. Absurd on Funnelweb.



SOULDRINKER

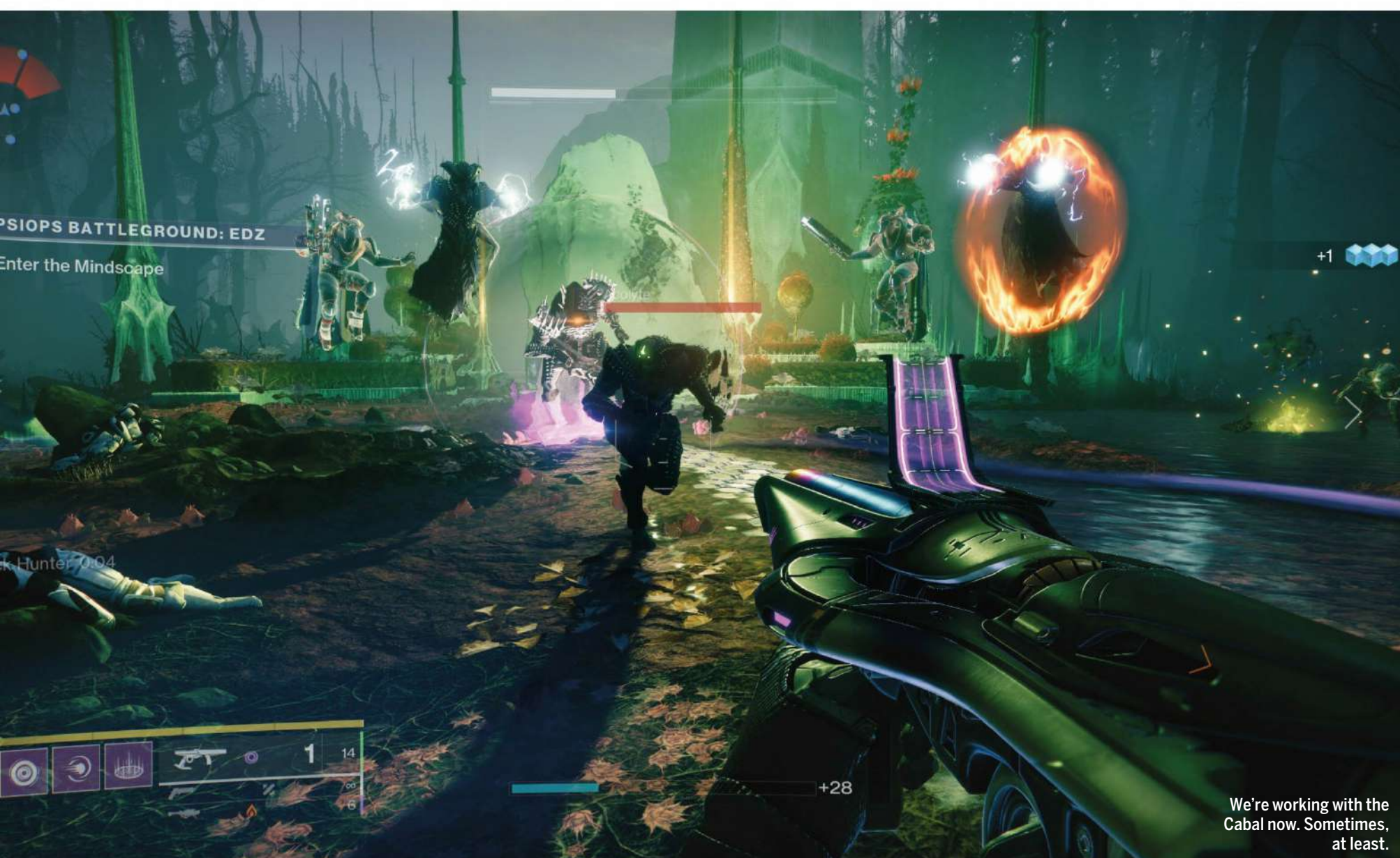
Source: Vow of the Disciple raid
Gain health based on hits before reloading. Brill on a wave-frame grenade launcher.

You knew Eris wouldn't sit out a Hive expansion.



FAR LEFT: Continuing everybody's obsession with tall monster women.

LEFT: Void 3.0 has ushered in the era of explosions.



We're working with the Cabal now. Sometimes, at least.



Ichora, contemplating the orb.



RIGHT: Scorn are back, and they're now big into the Darkness.

BELOW: The new seasonal activity is pretty good, and worth it for the guns.



» effect. I can choose how heavily to invest in each keyword through Fragment bonuses, mods, Exotic armour, and even weapon choice.

When the campaign is over, *Destiny 2* shifts back into its comfortable rhythm of chasing loot through repeatable activities, interspersed with the occasional Exotic quest. With last year's *Season of the Chosen*, Bungie finally hit upon a seasonal model that seemed to work, and so this year the same template returns unchanged. Seasons will again be placed in the Helm, and offer a weekly storyline tied to a new activity, with upgrades that you unlock each week.

With the format set, how good any individual season is mostly comes down to two factors: the activity it adds, and the loot you can earn. Based on those criteria, *Season of the Risen*, which launched alongside *The Witch Queen*, falls on the better end of the spectrum. The Psi-Ops Battlegrounds playlist is... fine. It warps locations to incorporate Savathûn's favoured aesthetic, which is cool, but it's overly familiar in terms of pace and objectives. But it gets a pass because the guns are good. Any season that offers a wave-frame grenade launcher is OK by me.

In fact, I've already got a pretty sizeable wishlist of guns to earn throughout the game. It's clear Bungie took to heart the complaints about *Beyond Light's* disappointingly small arsenal, because *The Witch Queen* adds plenty of new guns throughout. They're desirable, too, because the new Origin Traits give them an extra benefit based on their source. None of these perks feel particularly overpowered – so far I don't feel like I'm missing out if I use one of my older weapons. But I'm more likely to chase the new seasonal weapons because they all come with Land Tank, which gives increased damage resistance on kills.

PERKING UP

It's good, then, that *Destiny 2* finally offers a more deterministic path to the exact roll you want – albeit a slow one that doesn't entirely dispense with RNG. Before you can craft a gun, you first need to unlock its pattern by randomly acquiring Deepstight versions of that weapon.

Get kills or complete activities while the weapon is equipped and you can extract its materials, and earn progress towards unlocking the pattern. How many extractions a pattern requires depends on its source: raid weapons need five, which means you need to acquire five Deepstight versions of that gun – a random chance on an already

random drop.

And that's only to unlock the ability to craft the most basic version. Once crafted, you need to level it up through kills and activity completions. The higher its levels, the more of its perk

pool you unlock. The result is a significant time commitment before you can equip the best perks for your crafted gun of choice – to say nothing of the resource cost of equipping and changing those perks.

There's already been plenty of discussion about the tuning of this system – the drop rates for Deepstight weapons, and the cost of equipping enhanced perks. It's a system that will likely need plenty of revision and tuning before it's done. Based on the reaction, it seems to be a major source of frustration for many, and Bungie has already tweaked the drop-rate of guns from the Wellspring activity to account for how rare their Deepstight variants were.

Here's the crucial thing, though: for whatever the crafting system's

limitations, it is far better than what we had before, which was nothing. Given how the system is currently tuned, it's unlikely that I will craft god roll versions of every weapon it supports. But I also don't think that was the point. Using sidearms makes me sad, so there's no reason for me to ever craft one. Using the new seasonal bow – Under Your Skin – makes me happy, and the crafting system now gives me a guaranteed route to the roll that I want.

As smitten as I am with the new additions, *Destiny 2* remains a work-in-progress. There's always something that could stand to be improved. The core activities of Strikes, Gambit, and Crucible remain stale, in need of new maps. Really, though, if I have one overarching concern about the state of *Destiny 2*, it's that Bungie is still deleting chunks of it. The 'Destiny Content Vault' is Bungie's term for the removal of older parts of the game. This year's sacrifices are less dramatic than *Beyond Light's*, but still notable. Not only do we lose the *Forsaken* campaign and the Tangled Shore destination, we also lost most of last year's seasonal content.

Forsaken's campaign was good, and its removal is a shame, but *The Witch Queen's* is markedly better. Will it too disappear one day? I hope not. As *Destiny 2* enters this new era of consistent improvements, Bungie is regularly making things that are worth preserving. Take last year's standout Exotic mission, Presage, which was like nothing else in the game. Now it's gone, despite tying directly into the story of this season's Exotic quest Vox Obscura.

In the last mission of *The Witch Queen's* campaign, the soundtrack made itself known – triumphant, driving, and dense with interwoven motifs that evoke the series' history. The irony of the Content Vault is that *Destiny 2* loves to reference its past. And here, in the final moments of an incredible campaign that channels some of the best shooters of the last five years, it earns the right to do so. It's not just an indulgence; it's a victory lap. It would be a shame if that, too, was one day lost. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

There's still work to be done on the game at large, but *The Witch Queen* is a massive step in the right direction.

89

I've already got a pretty sizeable wishlist of guns to earn

ANATOMY OF A VOIDLOCK

How to build into the new Void 3.0 subclass



1 EXOTIC ARMOUR

Here I'm using Nezerac's Sin, which offers faster ability generation. More grenades means more explosions.

2 ARMOUR MODS

I've specced into Elemental Wells, which drop on grenade kills. When I pick one up, I get some damage resistance.

3 WEAPONS

Thanks to the Volatile Flow mod, Elemental Wells also supercharges Void weapons so that enemies killed by it explode.

4 FRAGMENTS

The Echo of Undermining buff means my grenades also weaken enemies, so they need less damage before they explode.

DAS BOOT

Traversing a drowned world in atmospheric puzzler **FAR: CHANGING TIDES**

By Tom Sykes

Where its predecessor was a game about crossing a dried-up seabed, *Far: Changing Tides* presents you with the opposite problem: there's really rather a lot of water here, so much that civilisation has seemingly washed away on the tide. What remains is you and your boat, which you acquire shortly after the game begins. As you learn the boat's peculiar ways, *Far* keeps unveiling new surprises. By the end, I knew every nuance of this trusty vessel, like a beloved car.

When you liberate the boat, the only things you have to worry about are the wind and natural or man-made obstacles. The latter are generally cleared by hopping back off the boat and solving (mostly intuitive) mechanical puzzles, while the wind is something you manage from atop the deck. It's a simple enough system – dragging the sail around to follow the breeze – but the physics, sound design and animation all conspire to make it feel like you're really bobbing about on the water.

Multiple times, the game pulls back on the puzzling to allow you the simple joy of sailing, for surprisingly lengthy stretches of time. The soundtrack fades away, beautiful

sights pass by in the background. It's just you and the ocean, as you keep one eye on the horizon and one hand gently tempering the wind. This is *Changing Tides* at its best. Between moments of hectic boat management, this pure sailing is a satisfying reward.

Your boat is complemented with a great clanking steam engine

Pretty soon your boat is complemented with a great clanking steam engine, which you power up with bits of junk found out in the world. You heave this fuel into the furnace and bounce on the bellows to light it up, causing mechanical oars to push the boat along, with no need for the wind. It's here that *Changing Tides* approaches a ship management game, like *FTL* or *Sea of Thieves*, but with one captain in place a crew.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An atmospheric puzzle game where you sail a boat across a submerged world

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Okomotive

PUBLISHER
Frontier Foundry

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H,
16GB RAM, GeForce
RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
farchangingtides.com

All this can be stressful, but I don't think there's a way to fail the game, to die or completely run out of fuel. You may be stalled for a few minutes while you cast around for bits of junk, but they always seem to crop up when you need them.

WHAT LIES BENEATH

Just when you're getting the hang of things on your boat, *Changing Tides* pulls the rug from under you and turns the vessel into a *submarine*, letting you plunge under islands and other massive things.

It's not a huge change, mechanically, but it means you now have to make time for moving the vessel up and down, to pass through underwater caves and facilities. If all that sounds like a lot of work, in practice it's not too bad as the controls are situated close together, while I never felt like I was being tested too severely. This level of ownership over the boat serves a different function, I think. It increases your connection to this rusty mass of metal and wood, making those moments of open sailing feel more meaningful. Every so often, you need to dive into the



ABOVE: You have a winch to gather junk from the sea floor.



You have a special suit that lets you breathe underwater.



When the wind picks up, save fuel by pulling up the sail.



ABOVE: It really is a beautiful game.

deep for supplies, or hop onto some giant structure to yank switches, and do other puzzley things. I'd say the puzzles are pitched just right, being not so challenging you'll be stuck for days, or so easy they feel like a waste of time, but I do think the commitment to minimalism can get in the way sometimes.

There's no in-game text (other than some very early tutorial messages), and no gentle nudges in the right direction if you do get stuck. While I appreciate the lack of hand-holding, it can be difficult to work out what the game wants from you exactly. Trial and error will usually get you there, but many of the puzzles only made sense in hindsight.

You're in the vessel for a long time, by the way – the journey kept going every time I thought it was over. And it *does* feel like a journey, more so than many games featuring massive open worlds.

It all comes back to those moments, those empty stretches of sailing the open sea. It's just you, the boat, some lovely scenery and the shifting winds. It's an emptiness that makes this peaceful post-apocalypse feel far bigger than it actually is. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Satisfying sailing in a beautifully soggy apocalypse. I've never felt so connected to a vehicle in a game.

86

This storm is a particularly exciting moment.



SHIP SHAPE

What do all these levers do then?



1 SINKING FEELING

Need to dive underwater? Simply pull this lever and the boat will fill with water, sinking into the depths.

2 REALLY USEFUL ENGINE

Toss fuel into here to power the engine, jumping on the bellows to control the speed of the vessel.

3 MORE FUEL YOU

Fuel, AKA bits of junk. It can be a pain to lug them to the boat, but there's a conveyor belt that feeds them into the furnace.

GUESTLISTED

NOT TONIGHT 2 brings the *Papers, Please* formula to a shattered American landscape

By Luke Winkie

Not Tonight 2 features one of the bleakest opening sequences in the history of videogames. A crowd of black and brown 20-somethings are protesting outside a bar in Seattle when an van pulls up and a modern-day American Gestapo tosses one of them into the back of a van. Your friend is now incarcerated in a Miami 'gulag' on the other side of the continent, and it's up to you and your comrades to find a way to rescue them.

From there, I expected *Not Tonight 2* to send me on a treacherous journey across a violent, white-nationalist landscape. Instead, one of my first stops was North Dakota, where I found that an everlasting Renaissance Faire had taken up residence in the shadow of Mount Rushmore. (The presidents have been replaced by wizards.) *Not Tonight 2* pulls from the political zeitgeist, but delivers a colourfully crude pastiche rather than transcendent satire.

Like the first game in the series, *Not Tonight 2* borrows nearly the full breadth of its mechanical functions from Lucas Pope's 2013 classic, *Papers, Please*. You play as a bouncer, and the only way to generate enough gas money to make it to Miami on time is by working at every club that is left standing in a tattered America. In gameplay terms, that means you pull into some sort of deranged American locale, find a gig and check IDs for pennies before pulling into the next station for the next chapter of the linear story.

Your bureaucratic duty is supposed to feel like a drag, but *Not Tonight 2* comes up with just enough variations to keep it from being completely tedious. At first you'll simply be checking to make sure your patrons are over 21 and don't have an expired licence, but before long you'll be scanning biometrics, seizing contraband, and kicking anti-maskers out of the queue. In one memorable pitstop, I needed to check 'musical tickets', which asked

me to pass a quick rhythm game while verifying that all of the other paperwork was in order.

The highlights in *Not Tonight 2* are found in its depiction of the US after multiple cascading crises. The South has seceded again, snapping the borders in two. Climate change has put New York City under water. Some sort of unnamed pandemic is raging out of control, to the point

that most of the Midwest is in a constant state of plague. (Also, the air is unbreathable in Los Angeles, but that's about par for the course.)

Not Tonight 2 is not a particularly subtle videogame. On a jaunt to the southern border I found that Trump

The South has seceded again, snapping the borders in two

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A paperwork simulator in the death throes of the United States

EXPECT TO PAY
£15.50

DEVELOPER
PanicBarn

PUBLISHER
No More Robots

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2070 Super, Intel Core i7-9700 @ 3.00GHz, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
nomorerobots.io/not-tonight-2

did in fact build his wall but, ironically, these days it's used more for keeping Americans in rather than foreigners out. A big-tech, neoliberal billionaire promised me deliverance in Raleigh; his name was Tom Swooney. At one point I found myself in a chicken slaughterhouse... where I used the same bouncer apparatus to decide which chickens were sent off to be butchered? There are moments of genuinely trenchant commentary, but the overall vibe here is so silly and relies on so many lowest common denominator cliches that it comes across like a formless synthesis of Twitter takes.

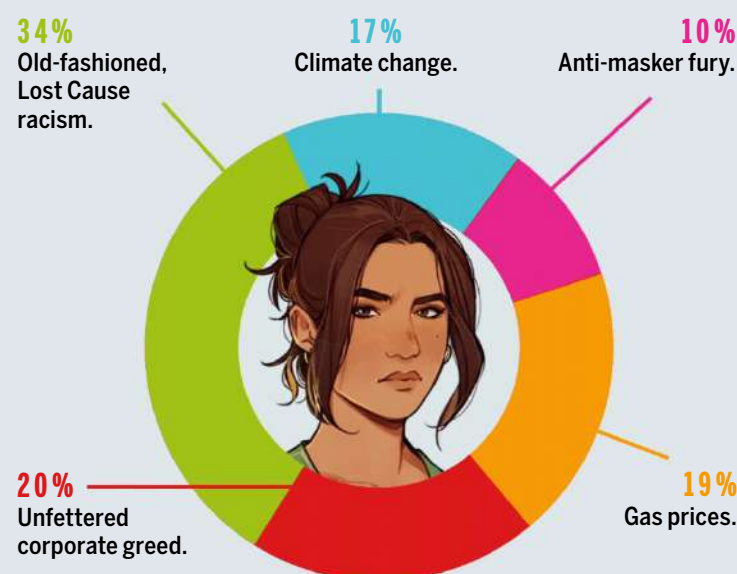
ON QUEUE

Most frustrating is that a lot of *Not Tonight 2*'s plot is told through a series of choose-your-own-adventure text boxes which are replete with all sorts of early *King's Quest*-style punitive bullshit. Pick the wrong dialogue choice? Bam, lose ten health. You have no way of predicting why. At one point I was forced to reload an earlier save because one of those chokepoints left my game in an unwinnable state. This is the sort of design I thought we shed in 1992, right around the time *Zork* made the jump to 3D.

By the end of *Not Tonight 2*, I'd learned to love the heuristics of scrutinising documents, but I was left unconvinced that a bouncer of all people had the best vantage point from which to explore its world. The grim monotony of *Papers, Please* beats you to a pulp, and it works very well, but *Not Tonight 2* is too colourful and macabre for that subtle, thematic approach. Handing out tickets was fun, but I wanted to see the party for myself. ■

BREAK DOWN

The factors that contributed to Not Tonight 2's American dystopia



PC GAMER VERDICT

Does a decent job of adapting *Papers, Please* to a terminally hateful America, but the premise wears thin quickly.

67

Yee-haw.



FAR LEFT: Chopping it up with the locals.

LEFT: In enemy territory.





Combat feels remarkably similar.

BELOW: Shouldn't you be leaping through a window in the Spencer mansion?



BORNE AGAIN

BLOODBORNE PSX demakes a PlayStation 4 classic, with great results

Here's PS4 favourite *Bloodborne* finally ported to PC – but as a PS1 game, complete with wobbly, warping textures, rigid controls, and loading screens galore. Of course, *Bloodborne PSX* is a fangame, but one that goes beyond a jokey tech demo or prototype (which is what most people would reasonably expect from it) to offer a pretty faithful recreation of *Bloodborne*'s opening hours, its cobbled streets, bosses, and all.

I've played *Bloodborne*. I've explored every inch of the city of Yharnam, and wow does this feel uncannily like it. The opening cutscenes have been recreated, but with low-poly character models and textures that look like a patchwork quilt. The enemies are as I remember them, in mostly the same places. It didn't take long for me to see past the downgrade, and let my memory guide me round these streets.

Well, familiar-ish. If there's a version of the uncanny valley effect that applies to video game demakes, then *Bloodborne PSX* is a prime example, as it's not quite a perfect recreation of Yharnam. A few areas, like the sewers, have been altered considerably, but the biggest stumbling block as I explored was the

presence of loading screens. These break up the contiguous environment of the PS4 original into a series of separate zones.

Steer your hunter down an alley, and you may find them transitioning to another area, which is probably how things would work if this were really a PS1 game. But an unfortunate side effect is that you can't make sense of the environment, as you turn back around to see a passageway fading to

nothing. I lost my bearings multiple times, something your actual *Souls* games are always good at avoiding.

BORNE AGAIN

That's one of the key ways in which this cover version diverges from the original, and feels more authentically

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Bloodborne done in the style of a PS1 game

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
LWMedia

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H,
16GB RAM, GeForce
RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
b0tster.itch.io/bbpsx

like a PS1 game, rather than a modern RPG passed through some grungy visual filters. On the whole the game maintains a fine balance, nailing the mechanics of combat, while also making it feel like you're controlling a late '90s PlayStation character.

There's no analogue control, either for the hero or for camera movement, and while the over-the-shoulder viewpoint helps to mitigate potential camera issues, I was constantly fighting my muscle memory of the original game. The controls are reassuringly similar to the standard *Soulsborne* setup, so much so that the few differences kept reliably catching me out.

While obviously inheriting a lot from *Bloodborne*, taken on its own this is a tense action game with rewarding combat. A little fiddly to control, and too easy to get lost in, but with an atmosphere that oddly fits with that hazy 32-bit look. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A mix of the modern and the old-fashioned. Familiar yet uncanny, this captures much of what makes the original great.

78

SPICE WORLD

UNDUNE II remakes a classic in PICO-8 form

BELOW: Spice equals money, which you need to build stuff.



You may have been hoping for a remake, but instead here's a demake of classic RTS *Dune II*. It's the game that birthed a genre, and for the last three years developer Paul Nicholas has been recreating it in micro game engine PICO-8.

It's a bang-up job, I'm happy to report. All three factions, units and building types, and all the campaign missions are included here. It's a fully featured RTS (given the limitations of PICO-8), with a neatly streamlined interface and art that's clear and readable, despite the low resolution.

However, there are a few wrinkles that make it slightly awkward to play. There's no build queue and, worse, no way to drag-select units, meaning you have to select them individually when throwing everything you own at the enemy's base. It's frustrating,

but not a deal-breaker, as this is not played out at blistering eSports speeds. It's a more stately real-time strategy, not to mention a less complex one by modern standards.

I played this after trying the recent *Command & Conquer* remake, and was struck by how much more I enjoyed the setting of *UnDune II*, with its feuding houses and deadly sandworms roaming the desert. The pixel art is full of character, and the tinny soundtrack surprisingly catchy. It's just a shame there's so little variation between missions: it's just one very similar bit of desert, and one very similar mission, after another.

This is an impressive achievement that pushes PICO-8 to its limits, although it's not the ideal way to play *Dune II* today. Those looking for a more modern take should check out fan remaster *Dune Legacy*.

77

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Paul Nicholas

LINK
bit.ly/3vr6wX9

KARAWAN OF LOVE

At world's end in turn-based strategy **KARAWAN**

The world is falling apart. Literally, it's falling off in clumps, which plummet into the abyss as you lead a caravan to safety. That's the premise of strategy game *Karawan*. Can you make it to a mystical portal before you run out of food and, eventually, terra firma? It's a great idea, with some interesting systems holding up the hex-based world.

Initially moving just one unit, you'll soon steer it into villages to recruit farmers, woodcutters, and miners, which tag along on the hexes behind you. Farmers will harvest berries (for food), while the others will gather wood and precious gems from adjacent hexes. Wood is used to build bridges over otherwise impassable water, while gems are the currency for magical spells. You can swap certain tiles around, or flatten

mountains to aid your progress. Exciting-sounding powers, but they never felt necessary.

How you move is important though, as your caravan has a snake-like tail. You want to lead farmers to bushes, and woodcutters to forest tiles, while keeping up forward momentum on the front-most unit. Wasting a turn moving over an empty hex can mean the difference between life and death, if you haven't banked enough berries to reach the next harvestable bush.

This being a jam game, it's understandable that the layout isn't randomised, but I feel that hampers *Karawan*'s replay value immensely. I've saved the caravan, and poked around in the two challenge maps, but I feel like I could have done more. Hopefully we'll see a bigger version of the concept someday.

72

BELOW: Hire workers at villages, or raid them for supplies.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
bippinbits

LINK
bit.ly/3BKiwua



HUN BELIEVABLE

TOTAL WAR: ATTILA – a brutal soap opera of neighbourly disputes and illegitimate sons

I've been here before. An encouraging, rosy-cheeked Saxon campaign, full of possibility and promise. Britain to the west, ripe and ready for plucking. Whole empires forming a bulwark between me and the Huns. It's like starting a new job and seeing a clean, empty Google inbox. It'll be different this time! I can taste the hope. I'm feeling so positive, in fact, that the first objective – 'survive till the year 400' – seems faintly insulting.

It takes three turns before things go irreparably wrong. I've approached this like a normal *Total War* game, in which your sleepy neighbours barely notice until you forcibly nudge them off their thrones. I use the grace period *Total War* games usually afford me to improve trade and build farms, safe in the knowledge that the other barbarians will shuffle about until I engage. But this is *Attila*: one of the most aggressive games in the series. Before the year is out my neighbours, the Langobards, decide they've had enough of my passive-aggressive animal husbandry. Instead of heading south to Italy like history tells us they should, they decide to invade with two massive armies. Suddenly, surviving until year 400

would be an inspiring victory. Not least because I've forgotten *Attila* has four turns per year.

It gets worse. I'm informed that one of my generals, Hengist, is making a play for a position of power without my permission. But the embarrassing part is I wasn't aware until now I had a general called Hengist. I'm so wrapped up in avoiding Langobards I completely missed the scheming prick was at sea, halfway to Britain,

which might go some way to explaining his dissatisfaction. I let Hengist make his way to Blighty, hoping the grumbling shit gets crushed by a collapsing henge. Back home, I hire enough mercenaries to weather the hungry Langobard attack. An inauspicious start.

***Attila* is flintier, and it makes for an enjoyably left-field experience**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The historical equivalent of seagulls fighting over a smashed tortoise

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Creative Assembly

PUBLISHER
Sega

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CUP
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
[totalwar.com/
games/attila](http://totalwar.com/games/attila)

TOTAL BASTARDS

For a series about pillaging and murder, *Total War* can often feel cosy. Modern iterations are attentive to the point of being motherly. *Attila* is flintier, and it makes for an enjoyably left-field experience. I learn to live with loss and failure, and I'm less inclined to roll back saves to more advantageous times. It's pleasantly erratic, too: my two sons, Esla and Cenred, have sired four illegitimate children between them. Cenred managed three in a *single turn*, which is such an impressive logistical feat I'm not even disgusted by him.

Attila, then, makes me feel like I'm in a nature documentary, and one in which I'm further down in the food chain than I'd like. Not quite a prey animal, but certainly not a sleekly-muscled apex predator. Whatever history tells us, Saxon supremacy will have to wait. I'm settling for year 400 for now. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Total War: Attila is an really enjoyable, yet, quite stern take on the period that defined the Western world.

83

BELOW: Not a humiliating loss. A deferred win.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£12

DEVELOPER
Plausible Concept

PUBLISHER
Raw Fury

COAST EFFECTIVE

Enjoying when things go south in **BAD NORTH**

I'm not saying I'm indecisive, but it takes me five minutes to select my units in *Bad North* just so I can pick exactly the right combination of grunt and goofy portrait. Wait, *am* I saying I'm indecisive? Perhaps. It's a jaunty, cartoonish start that makes me wonder if I've misunderstood everything I've heard about the game. Surely something this cute can't hurt me? Like the Stay-puft Marshmallow Man, or tree frogs.

I begin to understand when I almost lose my most treasured unit. I've spent too much gold on Petra. She's been handsomely upgraded. Her team of archers can pick off most enemies before their boats reach the shores. But I've equipped her with an item that lets her deploy twice in a single turn – which is fine – then sent her to defend an island on her own

– which is less fine. I've also misread the little helmeted-heads which explain which unit I'll be fighting. Instead of pliant, puncturable swordsmen, I'm up against warriors with shields who can bat away my arrows. It's around now I learn I can't flee unless there's a boat available.

Petra escapes, but it's a close enough call for me to understand how stern *Bad North* can be. There are no second chances here. Once a unit is wiped out it's gone forever, and recruiting new ones is rare. That looming sense of dread is like knowing there's a clown sleeping under your bed but not knowing when he'll wake up.

It gets deeply stressful when the waves increase and the choices become harder but the closer you are to failure the more satisfying *Bad North* gets. ■

86



THE BANNER SAGA 2

Not many games do doom correctly. But the second *Banner Saga* comes close to making the gathering storm of probably-death strangely compelling. And yet, what should be more depressing than a Mike Leigh film about lost balloons manages to retain its vital spirit – something humane and powerful that makes you want to keep fighting for survival, no matter how much you lose along the way. The presentation helps. The art remains breathtaking, and the music is perfect for making even giants feel small. Some niggling UI issues linger from the first game, but it's still an experience that makes me want to stand on a mountainside and contemplate sad things. ■

81



VIKING: BATTLE FOR ASGARD

I'm reminded of an ancient Bhuddist saying, "If you walk, just walk. If you sit, just sit. But don't wobble." The opening of *Viking: Battle For Asgard* reveals a game at peace with being a rental special. The sort of game you'd hire because the cover looked metal. And, to be fair, 2008-me would be pretty chuffed. It looks striking, in that vaseline-smearred way naughties games often do; the combat feels like a clod-hopping precursor to *Shadow of Mordor*. The cast includes Richard Ridings, who Creative Assembly fans will recognise as the voice of Thorgrim Grudgebearer. Or, more famously, Peppa Pig's dad. Snort! ■

66



FOR HONOR

Ubisoft's historian-bothering apocryphal-'em-up is a pretty big deal, but it gets the short entry this month because it only has seven vikings – notably less than every other entry on this list. *For Honor* has a childlike enthusiasm that's hard to resist. It attempts to answer a primal question that has troubled countless great minds for generations: who would win in a fight between ninjas and pirates? That clarity of purpose, combined with an elegant combat system, makes for an exhilarating game. ■

77



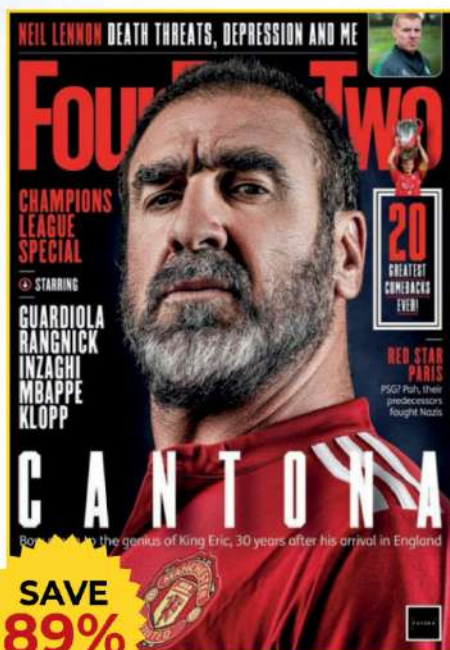
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HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



86

GROUP TEST

Discover the six best flightsticks for budding PC gaming pilots.



90

REVIEW

Our definitive verdict on Valve's groundbreaking handheld.

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INTERVIEW

Gabe Newell chats to us about everything from the Steam Deck to NFTs.



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TECH REPORT

Is it worth upgrading to Windows 11 for gaming, or should you wait?

100

TECH TALES

Performing your first PC upgrade is a rite of passage.



102

BUYER'S GUIDE

Our three expert builds will help you find the right parts for you.

GROUP TEST

JOYSTICKS

Don't get into a flap deciding on a joystick to round off your flight sim experience. *By Katie Wickens*

Whether you're making loop-de-loops in a Pitts biplane, or going long-haul in a Boeing 747, it's imperative that your flight sim sessions are piloted with precision. Sure, there are no real passengers around to persecute your flight control peripheral choice, but imagine the distaste if another pilot were to enter your cockpit and find only a mouse and keyboard.

For the full flight simulation experience you're going to want to snatch yourself a well-engineered Hands-On Throttle and Stick (HOTAS). Or for a more realistic approach (pun intended), a full-on yoke system might be the thing to get your propellers going. Whatever your flying style, there's a joystick for you. And to make the choice easier, we tested the following for their feel, functionality, build-quality, and all-important action.



THE DEDICATED EJECT
BUTTON HAS TO BE THE
TRUE SELLING POINT



Mach 1 HOTAS Combo

RAPTOR £130

All the buttons you need within a thumb stretch

1 As a no fuss combo purchase, the Mach 1 HOTAS is a hot option. In testing I was never without a button to assign and yet the design doesn't feel too complex. All the action buttons and hats are in reach of your thumb and fingers. There's no need to reassign oddly mapped controls when you plug in either – in *Microsoft Flight Simulator* at least it doesn't try to add its own control scheme, so you can avoid some stress in making it your own.

Once you're in and flinging the stick around in your game of choice, its heaviness combined with the non-slip pads mean

that mounting doesn't feel necessary. The electromagnetic sensor gives it an impressive accuracy, as well as the added durability, and although the X-axis action is a little clunky, it's a smooth experience. The buttons also have a very satisfying click to them.

Seeing as the stick and throttle come as a pair, you can use the passthrough on the throttle base, the downside unfortunately being you can't buy the stick separately.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Durable and sturdy
- Heaps of buttons
- Smooth Z- and Y-axis action

SPECS TYPE: THROTTLE AND STICK / BUTTONS: 32 / HATS: 2

Mach 2 Flight Stick

RAPTOR £100

Superbly smooth and professional looking

2 The Raptor Mach 2 is a little hard to find in the US but, unlike the Mach 1 HOTAS, you can actually buy it separately from the throttle quadrant. The drawbacks being you can't use the throttle passthrough, and it costs almost as much for the stick alone as it would for the Mach 1 HOTAS combo, despite the latter seeming to have more going for it for the price.

The Mach 2 flight stick does redeem itself somewhat in terms of impeccable action and accuracy, however it is still a little lacking on the button front. Although the buttons (and single hat) aren't as easy to

access as the Mach 1's, and there are less to play with, FR-Tec has added a double layer of mode switching for extra flexibility. All that layering up of actions can get a little confusing while you're playing a simulator, though. But there's still a very handy safety lock feature to prevent friendly fire, and the joystick does look like it was ripped straight out of an aircraft. In fact, the dedicated eject button has to be the true selling point, right?

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Safety lock and Z-rotation
- Mode switching with two levels
- Looks like it belongs in a helicopter

SPECS TYPE: THROTTLE AND STICK SOLD SEPARATELY / BUTTONS: 29 / HATS: 1

GROUP TEST



EACH HAND HAS ACCESS TO TWO TRIGGERS, TWO HATS AND A BUTTON

3

VelocityOne Flight Universal Control System

TURTLE BEACH **£350**

Jam packed with buttons and features

3 The VelocityOne Flight Universal is an example of Turtle Beach's tendency to pack more features than necessary into a design, while overlooking the build quality. That doesn't mean I wouldn't recommend it, but for over £350 it's a little wobbly where the throttle attaches, and it's got a slightly toy-like aesthetic. That said, its customisable flight instrument panel and built-in LCD display are a testament to just how much it has going for it over your average control system.

Not only is it compatible with both PC and Xbox, the throttle

and yoke both have smooth action and a comprehensive array of buttons, sliders and levers with swappable knobs. Each hand has access to two triggers, two hats and a button on top of all that, which is more than enough. That's alongside all the goodies packed into the throttle quadrant. And while the profile selection is great, those wishing to start over with their own control scheme will have to do some remapping.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Built in mount is super user friendly
- Action is smooth
- Profiles help to get it set up faster

SPECS TYPE: YOKE AND THROTTLE QUADRANT / BUTTONS: 40 / HATS: 4

TCA Yoke Pack Boeing

THRUSTMASTER **£450**

Super close to the real thing, but almost as pricey

4 The TCA Yoke is supremely professional. It's sleek with impressive action and a gorgeously smooth, pendular swing on the control column. That's really noticeable when you pull back and push forward on the control – it's not like the boring linear motion of most. If it wasn't plastered with Xbox branded buttons, and was a little bigger, it could be easily mistaken for a real Boeing airliner yoke. It covers all the bases without feeling complicated and is topped off with impressive build quality.

The built in mount makes it a cinch to set up, and there's no

need to mount the throttle really as they're quite stable. The yoke sits low between your legs, adding to the realism, and one of the hats is even an analogue stick for smoother POV.

All in all, despite some minor gripes with the odd button levers on the back of the throttle arms, the TCA Yoke Pack Boeing meets all the expectations of a practically pro-level yoke. However I would have liked some trigger sensitivity for the money it costs.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Beautifully smooth action
- Ergonomic, sturdy and professional
- Swappable levers

SPECS TYPE: YOKE AND THROTTLE QUADRANT / BUTTONS: 35 / HATS: 2



WHAT'S IMPORTANT
IN A JOYSTICK FOR
SPACE FLIGHT?

Barrelling around in space is a far cry from your standard jaunt across the stratosphere. To stand a chance at getting out of a space battle alive, a joystick packing Z-axis rotation is a huge game changer.

Traditional joysticks will come with pitch and roll control – forward, back, left and right – but some stalwart specimens are configured for 3D movement. With the ability to twist the stick clockwise or anti-clockwise, you can control yaw: a vital ingredient for accuracy, especially when you're zeroing in behind an escaping Sidewinder in Elite.

Z-rotation will give you that extra dimension of control for intergalactic escapades, and even comes in handy for terrestrial flights, should you tire of flinging yourself around in the vacuum of space.

TCA Sidestick Airbus

THRUSTMASTER £59

Flight stick with a European twist

5 If you're not a fan of Boeing's yoke flight system then a flight stick will be more your speed. The Thrustmaster TCA Sidestick doesn't look particularly space-age, being a rough replica of the controls of an Airbus A320. However, for a commercial flight sim experience with a European twist, it's the way to go.

The Sidestick definitely looks the part of a flight stick from 15 years ago but it came out just in time for *MS Flight Sim*. That means it's compatible with modern PCs and games. I will say like many of those sticks from the past it does suffer a

little from mass key confusion – there are no labels showing which button is which and you'll have to get to grips as you go.

The Sidestick offers a fluid movement for when you're trying to touch down in prevailing winds, and it's comfortable to hold over long periods. At an affordable price it's a good pick, and should see you filling out the air hours required for your licence with ease. You do have a licence, don't you?

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Gives a solid flight sim experience
- Additional throttle accessory
- Ambidextrous

SPECS TYPE: STICK AND THROTTLE SOLD SEPARATELY / BUTTONS: 33 / HATS: 1

G X56 HOTAS RGB

LOGITECH £200

A weapon of a joystick with some oddly-placed seams

6 The X56 HOTAS is an impressive evolution of the prior Saitek design, without omitting any of its great features. The throttle can be unlocked to provide inputs for left and right engines individually and the metal switches and knobs on the throttle feel super satisfying. And although there's a little more plastic than you expect from something like this, it's still sturdy. The seam running along the handle can feel a little jarring though, especially considering the quality present across the rest of the design.

The whole thing is deceptively light and both the

throttle and stick have a slight tendency to slip around, but the X56 allows you to affix it to nearly any surface with the appropriate hardware. It even comes with some suction cups if you don't want to wreck your desk. The stick tension is adjustable, and with 180 programmable controls it's more than capable of taking on whatever flight simulator you throw at it. And it does so in style, with incredibly smooth action to boot.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Clean design
- Durable hardware
- Lots of switches and knobs

SPECS TYPE: STICK AND THROTTLE / BUTTONS: 31 / HATS: 5



REVIEW

STEAM DECK

The Steam Deck can't yet play every game on Steam, but it's a great handheld gaming system nonetheless. *By Wes Fenlon*

When I pick up the Steam Deck, I think about Leathermans. You know that multitool that your uncle, or somebody's uncle, loves to bust out to solve any problem? Pliers, scissors, a bottle opener... with all those tools (and more!) a Leatherman is too big for a pocket, so it usually lives in a little belt holster. It's portable, but it still sticks out.

The Steam Deck is the Leatherman of gaming handhelds, or at least one that Leatherman uncles will love. The problem I've always had with Leathermans is that the miniature doodads are never as good as the proper tools they replace. And the Steam Deck isn't completely immune to that jack-of-all-trades problem – it's not a replacement for my desktop PC, or as portable as a Nintendo Switch.

But for me it's slipped into a sweet spot in the middle as the turbo-charged Switch Pro that Nintendo will

never make, and there are now some games I can't imagine myself playing on any other system.

During my first few days with the Steam Deck I tested the extremes with lightweight indies like *Into the Breach* and new, graphically-demanding games like *Deathloop*. This helped me pin down what, exactly, I want from it.

In most new, big budget games, locking the framerate to 30fps will be mandatory for stable performance and practical battery life. With the framerate capped at 60fps, *Deathloop* drained the battery from full to 20% in 70 minutes at about 60% brightness. And the Steam Deck wasn't really up to running it at a full 60fps – once I entered dense areas, the framerate took a nosedive. Locking it at 30 was much better, but sluggish for such a smooth action game.

The superb *Resident Evil 2 Remake* is a notable exception: with a mix of low and mid settings I was able to run it at 60fps, which was a genuine 'wow, this really works?' moment for such a

ABOVE: Not every game works brilliantly on Steam Deck – but for some, it's perfect.



THE STEAM DECK IS THE LEATHERMAN OF GAMING HANDHELDS

SKU FOR YOU

Which Steam Deck fits your needs?

\$399 - SAVER PICK

- 64GB eMMC memory
- Carrying case

Buy if: On a budget, don't mind slightly slower microSD load times

\$529 - VALUE PICK

- 256GB SSD
- Carrying case

Buy if: Only playing indoors, can live with a little glare

\$649 - LAVISH PICK

- 512GB SSD
- Anti-glare etched screen
- Slightly nicer carrying case
- Exclusive virtual keyboard skin

Buy if: Gaming in the sun is your lifelong dream

gorgeous game. But I did have to play at max brightness in the afternoon and crank up the in-game brightness setting to clearly see the screen in my brightly lit living room, so it looked a tad washed out and the battery dropped from full to 44% in an hour.

It's not ultimately how I want to experience *Resident Evil 2* – I want to play it with lighting and environmental detail cranked to max to fully immerse myself in the spooky atmosphere. That was the low-key 'your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could...' realisation that drove the rest of my time with the Steam Deck.

This will naturally differ for every PC gamer, and if the Steam Deck is your first gaming PC, there are likely loads of games you'd play on the system that I wouldn't. For me, it's a great fit for moderately demanding indies like *Death's Door* and *Hades* that can't run at 60fps on the Switch. It's brilliant for controller-friendly games that I just can't convince myself to play at my desk after sitting at it for work all day (I

SPECS

APU:
AMD Aerith

PROCESS:
7nm

CPU:
AMD Zen 2, 2.4, 3.5GHz

CORES:
4-core / 8-thread

GPU:
AMD RDNA 2, 1.6GHz

RAM:
16GB quad channel
LPDDR5 @ 5,500MT/s

STORAGE:
64GB eMMC / 256GB
NVMe SSD / 512GB
NVMe SSD

DISPLAY:
7-inch touchscreen

NATIVE RESOLUTION:
1280 x 800

REFRESH RATE:
60Hz

will play *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* this year, by God). And the Steam Deck is an absolutely killer system for emulation, which has made me really excited to finally play retro games I never got around to.

The couch (and bed) are the only places I expect I'll be using the Steam Deck – it's portable enough that I'd pack it for a longer trip but too chunky for me to toss in a backpack for a day out and about, which I will sometimes do with a Switch. 'Portable' can mean a lot of things, and the Steam Deck is like a Leatherman in a belt holster next to the 2-inch penknife that is the Switch.

HANDS ON DECK

The Steam Deck is an incredibly capable handheld PC, but that power comes with a heavy price. Like, literally. The Steam Deck is really heavy. It weighs 68% more than a Nintendo Switch and more than two Switch Lites or three PlayStation Vitas taped together. It weighs just a bit less than the four bananas I have in my kitchen

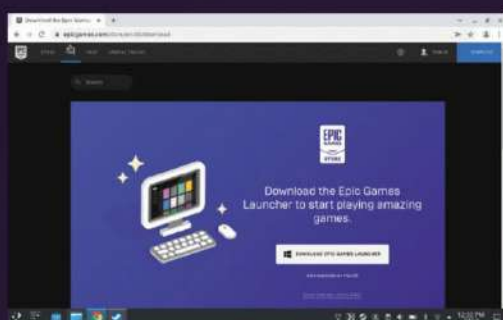
and contains 100% less potassium (but the Deck has 100% more GPU cores than the bananas, so I guess it balances out).

When I hold the Steam Deck up in front of me I start feeling a twinge in my forearms after 20 minutes. Playing for long stretches requires more deliberate positioning than with the Switch, so resting the Steam Deck on a pillow quickly became my preferred way to play. It's comfortably contoured, but the length and weight distribution make it awkward to hold while lying sideways or to use one-handed.

I hope there's a thinner and lighter sequel in the Steam Deck's future, but after gaming on it extensively I think Valve made the right call: the size of this first model is a necessary evil. It was never going to be as light as a Switch while fitting in the powerful AMD hardware, cooling, and battery necessary to make it work. I appreciate the generous, full-sized analog sticks, buttons, and d-pad on the Steam Deck compared to the smaller ones on the

THE STEAM DECK GETS EPIC

Epic doesn't have a launcher for Linux, but we can get Epic games in SteamOS anyway!



1 Go to the Linux desktop and use a browser to download the Epic Windows installer (Steam+X opens the keyboard).

2 In Steam, select Game > Add a Non-Steam Game To My Library. Click Browse, go to "/home/deck/Downloads" and change the file type to All Files.



3 Right-click Epic in Steam, Properties > Compatibility. Check the box. Select the latest Proton. Click Play to install.

4 Open the file explorer and hit the menu in the top-right to "Show Hidden Files." Navigate to this path: "Home/.local/share/Steam/steamapps/compatdata" to find a bunch of numbered folders. The Epic folder will have a much larger number than regular Steam games. Dive into the "pfx/drive_c/Program Files (x86)" folders within until you find Epic Games. When you do, go to:

"Epic Games/Launcher/Portal/Binaries/Win64".

Find EpicGames Launcher.exe. Right-click > Copy Location.



5 In Steam, right-click Epic, Properties > Shortcut. Paste the path you copied. Do the same for the Start In field, but delete "EpicGamesLauncher.exe".

6 Rename your shortcut, then click "Return to Gaming Mode" on the desktop. Login and install some games!



You can plug it in to a monitor and use it like a normal PC.

» Switch. They all feel great under my thumbs and help justify the size.

The cooling on the Deck is capable, and the system will never get hot in your hands the way a gaming laptop can roast your crotch, but the downside is that its fan will ramp up to an annoying pitch even under relatively light loads. The fan noise is my least favourite thing about the Steam Deck, a drawback to keep in mind if you're planning to play it next to someone who hates high-pitched whirring.

U AND I

I'd put this new version of SteamOS up against any of the current consoles for functionality and ease-of-use. The Steam button pulls up a range of system basics including the library, store, your downloads and system settings, while a more smartphone-esque '...' button pulls up quick settings like brightness, power management, and notifications. Being able to tap the power button to put the Steam Deck to sleep, then wake it up again completely

seamlessly still gives me a little thrill: It's one of the few console features to be envious of on PC, and here it just works. Even with non-Steam games and emulators, which is why I've had *Persona 3* running on my Steam Deck practically nonstop.

I did hit some bugs in my testing and some Steam features that don't seem to be working yet, like setting custom artwork. Sometimes the 'check for update' button hangs until I restart, cloud saves don't always automatically download, and the brightness slider is sometimes wrong after waking the system up from sleep. But those are minor issues that haven't bothered me much, and Valve has been releasing updates at a rapid pace.

What's harder to predict is how quickly Valve will expand its selection of 'Verified' games that it has tested and declared to be 'Great on Deck.' SteamDB notes that about 500 out of nearly 65,000 games have earned the badge. Valve just hasn't tested all that many games as yet.



But the Steam Deck will let you install any game in your library and give it a shot, and of the dozens of games I've tried that Valve has yet to verify, almost all of them have worked just fine. It's another trade-off, making the Steam Deck as open-ended as any PC even though some games will just not work. Again I think they made the right call: the Steam Deck was never going to have the tightly controlled ecosystem of a Switch or PlayStation, so it's better off not pretending to.

IT'S A PC

The futzing it takes to dial in controls in some games is a reminder that this is still a configurable PC. We can all decide on 30 or 60fps caps, whether to forego anti-aliasing for an extra 20 minutes of battery life, or shoot for image quality. These decisions have always been a part of PC gaming, but the Deck makes some of them simpler. Being able to toggle a 30fps lock from the quick settings menu will cover tons of situations alone.

Valve's use of the Linux desktop is what separates the Deck from any other system out there. It's easily accessed but you could happily use the Steam Deck without ever seeing it, which makes for a vastly better gaming experience than booting into Windows.

THE DESKTOP COMES WITH AN APP BROWSER FOR ONE-CLICK INSTALLING

The desktop comes with an app browser for one-click installing app 'flatpaks,' with a nice selection: staples like Spotify, VLC Media Player, and every emulator I wanted. If you want something that isn't available there, you really have to know your Linux-fu. But it's mercifully easy to install some basics, then pop back over to SteamOS. And SteamOS is happy to let you run

ABOVE: The device feels sturdy and well-crafted in your hands – if a bit heavy.

multiple programs at once, so I booted up a podcast app, added the RSS feed for 99% Invisible, and simultaneously played a game, no problem.

Going beyond that at the moment is limited. Valve and AMD are still working on Windows drivers. It's possible to plug the Deck into an external monitor and the Linux desktop will run well, but we had issues with SteamOS outputting above its native 1280x800. I think the Steam Deck will make for a powerful travel PC and even a convenient way to run low-spec games on a TV. Right now it's a handheld first and foremost, and it does that so well it's comical how much cheaper it is than other handheld PCs.

It doesn't even make sense to call them competitors. The Steam Deck is in a class of its own. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

The Steam Deck is bulky for a handheld, but makes up for it with unrivalled versatility and a killer price.

85



**“HOW DOES
MOBILE PC
GAMING
EXPAND ON
THIS RANGE OF
EXPERIENCES?”**

INTERVIEW

A WHOLE NEWELL WORLD

Valve president **GABE NEWELL** has big plans for the Steam Deck

There's hardly a figure that looms larger over PC gaming than Valve president Gabe Newell. The company's games are some of the most influential ever made; Steam has come to dominate the entire industry; and now he's hoping to make a whole new breakthrough in handheld gaming. So, fresh from our Steam Deck review, we sat down to ask him about what made the device possible, his ambitions for the future, and, er, NFTs.

It feels like Steam OS is the secret sauce of the Steam Deck that we haven't seen in a portable PC before. Are you still planning to release it publicly? Or is there any worry that the next portable system would simply take that and become a Steam Deck copycat?

No, actually, we hope they do. I mean, in order to get here, we had to follow a fairly lengthy process. And all of the steps along the way, whether it was Steam Machines, or Link, or the controller, or the work we've done building products in-house with Index and so on, has enabled us to get to the point that we can build Steam Deck. It's just more [about] timing than anything

to release Steam OS, and to enable other people to build related products.

When you debuted the Steam Deck, you spoke about hoping that it was the beginning of a new ecosystem for portable PCs. What do you hope to see from other hardware companies, if the Steam Deck is a hit?

I think we're gonna start seeing a bunch of innovation, given you've got all the power and flexibility of the PC. You can put your own OS in it, you can attach peripherals to it. You can put whatever store on it that you want. We'll also see similar innovations on the hardware side; one of the core challenges that we thought we had to take on with this generation was the price point. So the \$399 price point was sort of written in stone. I think we were a little bit surprised that instead of the entry level SKU being the most popular one, it was the high end SKU.

And maybe that will change over time, once we get through the early adopters and move into broader markets. [...] It'll be interesting to have somebody else come along and say, 'Oh, you know, that's great; but I think you're missing an opportunity with these kinds of users who are going to want these kinds of capabilities or options on those devices.' So we're



» pretty excited. If we knew what those answers were, we'd go and do them, we'd be making them right now!

Do you think any of the current tech trends that are in the headlines this year are pushing technology or PC gaming forward, specifically thinking of the metaverse and NFTs?

There's a bunch of get rich quick schemes around metaverse. I don't really understand, most of the people who are talking about metaverse have absolutely no idea what they're talking about. And they've apparently never played an MMO. They're like, 'Oh, you'll have this customisable avatar.' And it's like, [...] go into La Noscea in Final Fantasy XIV and tell me that this isn't a solved problem from a decade ago, not some fabulous thing that you're inventing. [...] I'm friends with Neal Stephenson, and every time we get together, he just puts his face in his hands. So it's like, 'OK, what metaverse story is driving you insane today?' I'm sure it'll get sorted out. I mean, obviously the gaming industry has been exploring these technologies for a long time. It will be interesting to see if anybody who's coming to the party late has much to add, rather than a desire to have a whole bunch of people give them a bunch of money for magic reasons. But in the end, customers and useful technology win out, so I'm not super worried about that. The question you should always ask yourself is 'what problems am I solving for customers?' Or 'what are the tools I'm building for partners?' Or 'how am I making the people who work on these problems more productive?' Most of the people talking about this are not being driven by any of those three priorities, and that usually ends in tears!

What's your personal take on cryptocurrency? Could you also



elaborate on Valve's stance, which basically says 'no games that use the blockchain or crypto on the store'?

There are two issues. There's a lot of really interesting technology in blockchains and figuring out how to do a distributed ledger. [...] If you need a distributed ledger, this is what's interesting. The problem is that a lot of the actors who are in that space are not people you want interacting with your customers. We had similar problems when we started accepting cryptocurrencies as a payment option – 50% of those transactions were fraudulent, which is a mind-boggling number. These were customers we didn't want to have. And the customers who were legitimate

users were often really frustrated, because you don't want your medium of exchange to have tremendous fluctuations on a day-to-day basis. At the end of the day your payment is a function of the number of hours you spend. [...] So people were really

confused, where one day they'd be paying \$9.95 for a product, and the next day, they'd be paying \$139. Right? That's the problem with having a medium of exchange that was as volatile as that. [...] And that's where we were at with the blockchain-based

“50% OF THOSE TRANSACTIONS WERE FRAUDULENT, WHICH IS MIND-BOGGLING”

NFT stuff, so much of it was ripping customers off. And we were like, 'Yeah, that's not what we want to do. We don't want to enable screwing large numbers of our customers over,' so that's what drove that decision. There's nothing inherently about distributed ledgers that makes them problematic. It's just so far that's almost always what our experience has been.

Bearing in mind the supply chain shortages, how different is the price to build the Steam Deck now, compared to when you first announced the consumer price? Has that changed?

In order to get the pricing we needed, we had to make commitments to purchasing, and the pricing got locked in at that point; we don't have a lot of variable pricing for a while. The fundamental thing is, it's not a supply

STEAM POWER

The Steam Deck is far from the first Valve hardware project



STEAM MACHINE

Valve had big plans for these PCs, each preinstalled with SteamOS, but it all seemed to go quiet before they even launched.



CONTROLLER

An inventive bit of kit, but it didn't catch on, and Valve ultimately ended up selling off remaining stock at clearance prices during a sale.



STEAM LINK

In many ways this device's streaming tech was ahead of its time – launching years before Stadia and other cloud gaming platforms.



VALVE INDEX

A VR headset that's niche, but by design – it's an expensive but top of the line bit of kit, aiming for the definitive virtual reality experience.

LEFT: You might think Gabe has his own special, souped-up version of the Steam Deck, but no: "My Steam Deck and my son's Steam Deck are exactly the same as what customers are getting."

shortage, it's a massive increase in demand. The bad thing would be if something fundamentally is impairing our ability to produce chips, and that's actually not the problem. It's that there's been these titanic 50, 80, 100% increases in demand because consumers, who can't go to movies, go to movie theatres, and don't want to go to sporting events and so on, and don't go to clubs, have to spend their money somewhere. So a whole bunch of that money is shifted into purchasing cars,

housing, and playing games. So we've seen a huge uptick in that. Any of those short-term distortions that are caused by finding out that somebody can make some lapping machine for lapping silicon, large cylinders of silicon, [but] needs nine months to build another bunch of machines [...] those problems will just get sorted through, they're not deep ones. But these increases in demand seem to be pretty stable. And that's fundamentally good news for PC gaming, PC software developers, PC

hardware manufacturers, that demand is increased and looks like it'll be a permanent level reset. It'll just take a while for that to come up. It would be bad if factories are burning down, or, you know, we're running out of some critical supply; but it's really just an unanticipated surge that exceeded any of the buffers that people had built into the system to accommodate either a supply shock or a demand shock.

Do you have any idea when the Steam Deck might get to the point where someone can simply click 'Buy', and have it delivered a few days later?

No, because the demand is high, so it's gonna be a while till we get caught up.

What about Game Pass, is that something you would like to see on Steam, if Microsoft wanted that? Has Valve talked about doing its own games-based subscription?

We'd be happy to work with Microsoft [to have] Game Pass on Steam. I don't think it's something that we need to do ourselves, in terms of building a subscription service at this time. But for their customers, it's clearly a popular option. [...] If your customers want it, then you should figure out how to make it happen. That's sort of where we're at.

Were there prototypes of machines that were shooting for a more high-end experience, similar to the Index? A \$1,000 version of the Steam Deck?

No, because we always thought that the price point was one of the critical things. Pretty early on, we were driven by a set of ergonomic considerations, performance considerations, and by price point. The big focus with this generation is [to] take the existing Steam library, [and] get it to work great on a mobile device with a great feel, and a great play experience. And then, in subsequent generations, the opportunity is going to be to explore, how does mobile PC gaming expand on this range of entertainment experiences we can get? And that's probably where we're gonna try adding new, interesting hardware, taking it out to software developers, seeing if it resonates with them. Iterating on that. With VR, we thought that it was all about that. [...] I still think we're below the bar of what's an acceptable VR experience, even with Index. Whereas the value proposition to a customer of 'I can play all of my favourite games that I'm already playing and have them work super well in a mobile gaming scenario', that was an obvious one. ■



GROWING PANES

Does **WINDOWS 11** offer any reason for gamers to upgrade yet?

Free to Windows 10 owners and rolling out on a gradual basis, Windows 11 once promised gamers the world. “If you’re a gamer, Windows 11 was made for you,” said the Redmond giant, with all the conviction of a shopping channel presenter. Taken at its word, we’d be best off installing a box-fresh OS as soon as it’s made available to us and enjoying the smorgasbord of excellent features designed specifically for us, the gamers.

Few of us have done so since its initial 2021 release, of course. Because we’ve been hurt by this sort of thing before. Steam’s January hardware survey had 13% of the platform’s user base using Windows 11 and over 77% sticking with trusty old Windows 10 64-bit. Since not everyone’s eligible for the upgrade just yet – spring/summer this year is when Microsoft estimates we’ll all get upgrade access – those figures don’t tell the whole story, but they do feel familiar. Historically it’s been a terrible idea to jump onto the next Windows at launch, like strapping into a prototype car as it hurtles towards a crash test zone. Eventually we’re all either incentivised, or strong-armed, to make the leap. But what if you’re facing that decision today? What possible benefits might you see in gaming, and has Microsoft backed up that “made for you” rhetoric yet?

The three big features aimed squarely at gamers are DirectStorage, a revamped and overhauled Microsoft Store, and Auto HDR. Not such a seductive proposition as Vista, which tempted us all down its garden path of resource-heavy translucent menus in 2007 by dangling DirectX 10 before us. Indeed, since one of the year’s biggest PC games, *Crysis*, was such a hype monster specifically because of its DirectX 10 graphics, Vista seemed begrudgingly mandatory.

STORAGE WARS

DirectStorage probably comes closest to that historical precedent for noticeable performance or fidelity gained. It’s a bit of tech imported from the Xbox ecosystem that speeds up NVMe SSD performance to get your games loading a good bit faster.

Traditionally game data that your GPU needs to render a scene moves from your storage drive to your RAM in compressed form, and is then uncompressed by your CPU before it’s handed over to your GPU to render. This often creates a CPU bottleneck and slows gaming performance down. You’ll notice this during loading screens and areas where the game needs to access big chunks of data, like those interminable ‘squeezing through gaps’ sequences in action games that frankly aren’t fooling anyone.

The idea behind DirectStorage, as its name suggests, is to cut the CPU out of that equation and provide a more



XP boost

So what’s the gold standard? What was the best operating system for PC gaming ever? Over 20 years later, there’s still a consensus that WinXP has never been bettered. Why? Probably in part because its successor Vista made it look so performance-efficient and well designed by comparison. Subsequent editions all seem to have fallen into those same traps: redesigns with no clear benefit and resource-heavy frills.



FAR LEFT: Windows 95 makeovers for Win10 are very much a thing. Change is hard.

LEFT: The Store makeover's definitely an improvement. Then again, what wouldn't be?

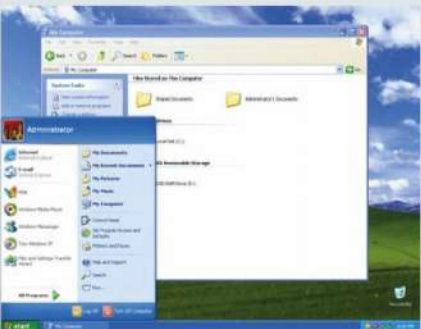
WIN WINS *The best bits from Microsoft's past efforts*



START BAR WINDOWS 95
The Start bar is just so intuitive, Microsoft still can't remove or improve it two decades later.



DVD SUPPORT WINDOWS 98
Without it, we'd all have been disc-swapping CD ROMs like disorganised DJs.



NT KERNEL WINDOWS XP
Multi-threading, memory management, 64-bit operation – still the basis of modern Windows.



DIRECTX 10 WINDOWS VISTA
Definitely a rose tinted view, but blimey did it ever make games look a whole lot better overnight.

direct, speedier path from uncompressed data sitting on your SSD to GPU. At an API layer, it carries out the decompression tasks at the GPU stage, and that means you need both a speedy NVMe SSD hooked up via PCIe 3.0 or higher, and a pretty handy DirectX 12 graphics card to use it. Who among us wouldn't want faster loading times? Easy win for Windows 11.

TROUBLE GLAZING

It comes with caveats. Obviously the hardware requirements, but also the fact that as of late 2021, it's now also available on Windows 10. It's not quite as effective there due to some other legacy OS code that affects SSD behaviour, but it's not a Windows 11 exclusive feature. More significantly, DirectStorage needs developers to make use of it per-game, so it's not as simple as us turning it on locally on our PC and enjoying the benefits. So far, the list of DirectStorage-compatible PC games is... well, empty.

The Microsoft Store overhaul, then. It would be unkind but not wholly inaccurate to say that just about any change to its Windows 10 incarnation would be an improvement, such is its nightmarish and labyrinthine series of looping menus, disappearing games, and obnoxious layout. Windows 11 does indeed clean the whole thing up, but it's still nowhere near as usable as Steam, and since Windows 11's release it hasn't filled itself with relevant content to PC gamers. Plainly, it's no reason to upgrade on its own. Game Pass integration is better-designed and easier to navigate, but at this point even loading up a Ubisoft game through

Steam and then having to go through Ubisoft Connect feels like having a cavity search in airport security, so it's hard to properly assess the merits of Microsoft Store.

Auto HDR works without any fuss, as PC Gamer's own Dave and Wes have found during their exhaustive testing of Windows 11 at launch. If your monitor is HDR-compatible, which is admittedly something of a rarity, this feature will tonemap non-HDR-compatible games so you can enjoy all that extra dynamic range. It's also good news for those who use fancy OLED TVs as monitors, but since the vast majority of Steam's hardware survey participants (67%) are playing at 1920x1080, one suspects it's not a feature many have cause to use just yet.

THE IDEA BEHIND DIRECTSTORAGE IS TO CUT THE CPU OUT OF THAT EQUATION

TOP PERFORMER

There's one significant saving grace to Windows 11, though: it appears to run games slightly faster than Windows 10. Despite its Vista-like frills and eye for

transparency all over the UI, a collection of small efficiencies seems to be adding up to create marginal – *marginal*, mind you – FPS advantages in our benchmarks. It'd be a brave upgrader who goes for it right now based on that, given all the memory leak and SSD-thrashing bugs that Microsoft has been patching out, and which might well negate any performance gains they'd otherwise receive. Microsoft also has to address disastrous performance losses on prebuilt Windows 11 systems thanks to its VBS security system, affecting FPS by 25% or more. Not an issue for upgraders, but indicative of the reality that perhaps not every crease has been smoothed out yet. For now, then, we wait. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

THE EVIL WITHIN

The first upgrade: PC gaming's most perilous rite of passage

There are two sides to PC gaming, more or less. One of them involves sitting somewhere comfy and playing games on a PC. The other, less clearly defined in the pastime's name, is about taking stewardship of the machine that makes the games happen. This side of the coin is far less logical than the other, which by contrast is fairly simple intrinsic enjoyment. The knowledge that we could delve inside our PCs and have some agency over the performance they contain is inherently corrupting, like the sacred insights within an Elder Scroll or an uncomfortable Adam Curtis documentary. Things are never the same afterwards.

Upgrading one's personal computer, then, is a natural rite of passage for the subculture. We're making the machine ours by dictating the exact specification of components within it, hewing its form from a Scan basket and watching its proverbial newborn eyes blink up at us with parental adoration when we hit the power button. It's just a shame it's such a dreadful and convoluted ordeal, isn't it?

TRIAL BY FIREWALL

It's a bit easier these days, at least. This writer's first PC upgrade experience happened in the days of beige cases

that were made from disposable razors and filled with baffling cable vermicelli; where any attempt to even locate a specific component was an obstacle course through PCBs that looked like they were never intended for consumer eyes; when it was eminently possible that you could get it wrong enough to do lasting and heartbreaking damage to any and all of the befuddling parts before you. I'm talking, of course, about the year 2002.

Aged 16, full of the kind of can-do exuberance that gets knocked out of you by 30 and lamenting the poor

performance of my Voodoo 2, I decided I'd build a new PC from scratch. This fanciful new Windows XP-based machine would feature a Hercules 3D Prophet Mk. II, would render *Quake III Arena* in newfound texture detail, could hold way more installed games, and would be absolutely ace, it was decided.

In the subsequent weeks since the parts all arrived and I confidently pieced them together, just about every IT-literate human in my village was drafted in for support. Not just immediate friends, who were just as clueless to the abortive and worrying bleeps my new device emitted as I, but older siblings of those friends, school bus IT consultants, parents, and step-parents. It was a community effort, achieving that first boot to Windows, and the lad who finally cracked it has subsequently held senior positions at Microsoft and Google. Coincidence? Yes.

This was a different time for PC hardware culture. No consideration was given to the user-friendliness of internal componentry, let alone aesthetics. This was a time when PC World charged £80 for RAM installation. Only hardcore enthusiasts and young idiots would go inside a PC case and try to achieve something productive inside it, and if something went wrong, well done mate, you've also just destroyed your only means of accessing the information you need to fix it. Now, without any means of internet access, your options were to consult the village elders, write to PC Gamer hardware legend Adam Oxford, and hope he'd solve your problem in, ooh, a month, or go and take up fishing.

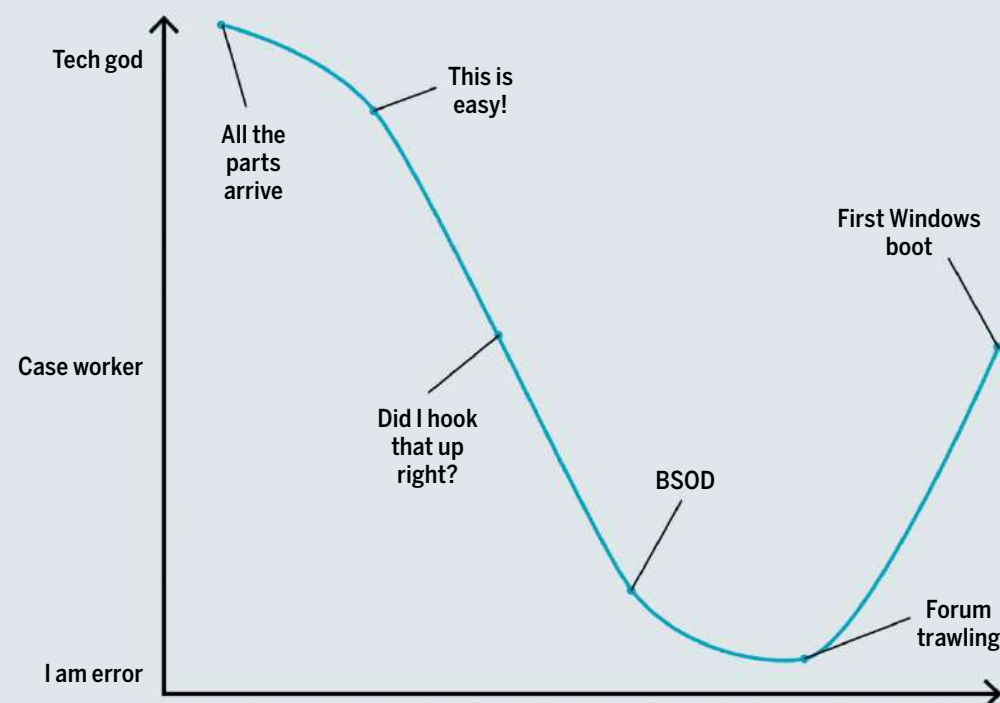
CASE STUDY

In the intervening years, not only has enthusiast-grade PC kit become more user-friendly, the wealth of resources to help you perform an upgrade or a full build is vast. You can build along with your favourite YouTuber now, following their steps in 4K 60fps video while they find increasingly tenuous ways to tell

ONLY HARDCORE ENTHUSIASTS AND YOUNG IDIOTS WOULD GO INSIDE A PC CASE

CASE IN POINT

Every 'first build' experience, charted



PHIL IWANIUK

Nicknamed 'The Human EMP grenade' during his tenure at PC Format, Phil Iwaniuk has built and disassembled countless PCs now. He still has absolutely no idea what's inside them.



This is fine. The smoke is just your PC's way of thanking you for new parts.

you about *Raid: Shadow Legends* along the way. And yet... it's still not a foolproof process, is it?

RAM installation's easy, granted, as is hooking up a new GPU. CPUs are a bit trickier, requiring you to judge, by eye, how much thermal paste is enough to prevent your new £500 chip from overheating to death, and then attach a cooler to it. Oh, and if your cooler's a certain size you need to install your RAM first or the cooler will obstruct the clearance. And you'll also need special low profile RAM sticks. Same goes for hooking up your SATA cables behind the graphics card that you just screwed firmly into place. And let's not even get started on hooking up front panel connectors.

Perhaps it's that inherent difficulty, the required specialist knowledge, that makes building and upgrading your own PC a rite of passage. Like people who insist that driving a car with a manual gearbox is somehow more fun, we upgraders have endured a technical hurdle which might feel wholly unnecessary and outdated but still offers a kind of smug gratification for having mastered. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

BELOW: These days you can even build along with PC Gamer on YouTube.



YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£792

MOTHERBOARD		B550 Gaming X AM4 Gigabyte £99 This motherboard offers two display outs to support our choice of chip, while also delivering a modest selection of USB ports.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 5600G AMD £265 This is a little pricier than we'd like, but it's one of few viable budget options that avoids a discrete graphics card for gaming.
GRAPHICS CARD		None This build is tailored to today's GPU shortage. But don't fret, once cards are back in stock you could slot one in to this PC for an upgrade.
COOLER		Wraith Stealth AMD Free with CPU The Wraith Stealth is a great cooler made even better by the fact it comes free with our choice of chip. Budget heaven.
MEMORY		Vegeance LPX 8GB (2x 4GB) DDR4-3000 Corsair £39 For gaming we only really need 8GB of RAM, and this stuff is quick to boot.
POWER SUPPLY		MWE White 400W Cooler Master £39 Small by today's standards, this PSU from a trusty manufacturer offers plenty of juice for this build and a little more.
SSD		MX500 500GB Crucial £57 One of the best value SATA SSDs you can buy and plenty fast enough for a snappy OS.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash, but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		Neos BitFenix £36 You'll want to minimise how often you rebuild your PC, so make sure to give it a good home. This case'll do nicely.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,500

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Mortar WiFi MSI £180 This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 12400 Intel £170 Intel's 11th Gen was at its best on a budget, and that's why this six-core/12-thread processor is a great fit for this build.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £369 The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel £30 Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 12th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while
MEMORY		Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB) Crucial £75 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		S70 1TB Addlink £70 Building on a budget doesn't mean sacrificing speed – the Addlink S70 proves you can indeed have both.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £70 An ATX case is all you need for this build. We like this one because it's simple, functional, and really nice to look at.
DISPLAY		AOC G2590FX AOC £173 Everything a PC gamer could want: Full HD, 144Hz refresh rate, 1ms response time, AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync compatible.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

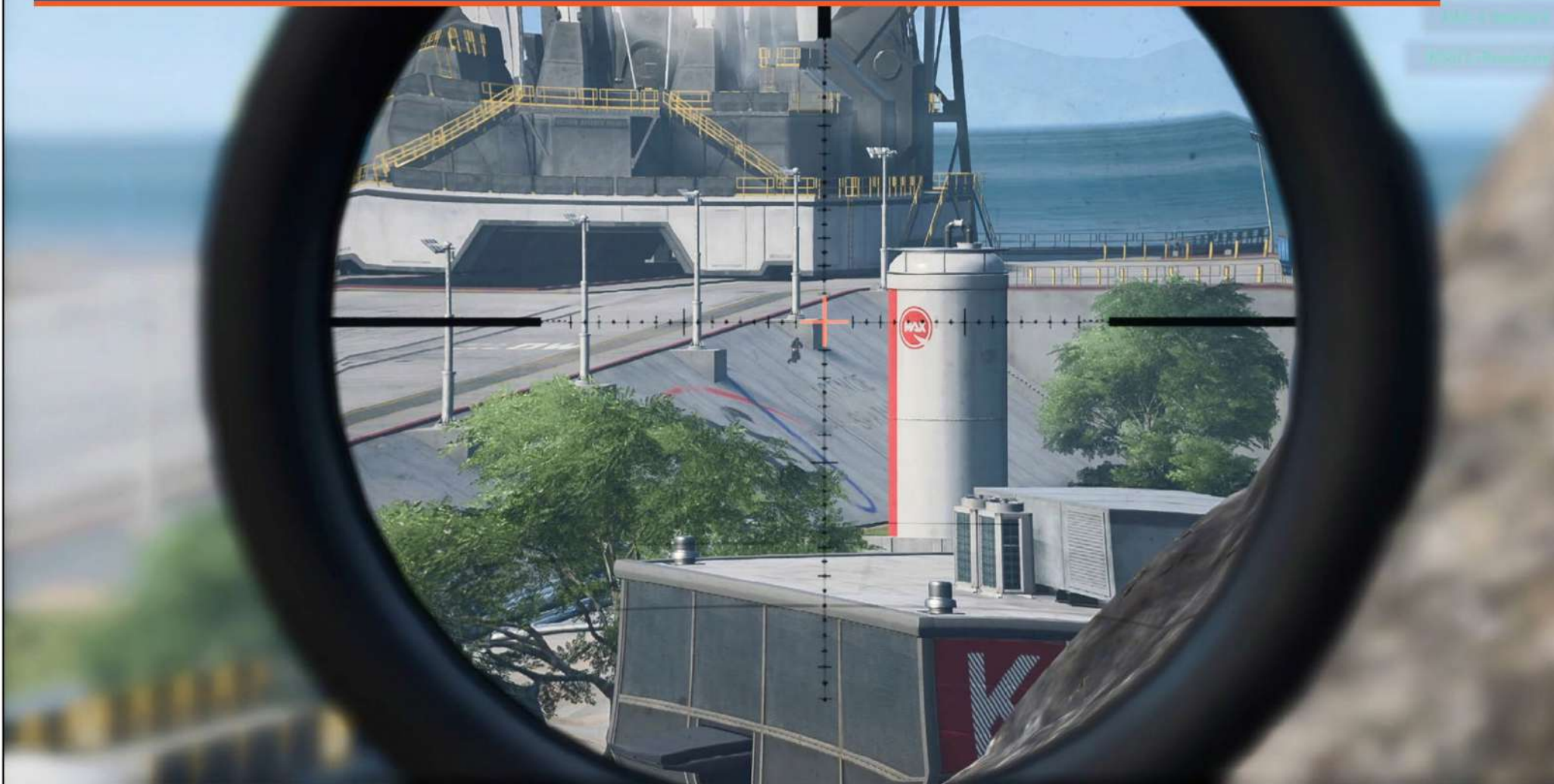


TOTAL
£4,501

MOTHERBOARD		MPG Z690 Carbon WiFi MSI £410 This MSI motherboard offers a mix of high-end features, plentiful ports, and DDR5 support, without an extreme price tag.
PROCESSOR		Core i9 12900K Intel £599 Intel's Core i9 12900K represents Alder Lake's finest chip, and it's one hell of a processor for whatever you might throw at it.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3080 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £1,199 The RTX 3080 Ti is the latest flagship graphics card from Nvidia, but savvy builders may prefer the RTX 3080.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, LGA 1700 bracket, and RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Dominator Platinum RGB 32GB Corsair £290 A new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. The Dominator Platinum RGB 32GB is blisteringly quick.
POWER SUPPLY		SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold EVGA £200 This calibre of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.
SSD		WD Black SN850 1TB Western Digital £120 Though technically this platform support PCIe 5.0, for now we're sticking with WD's PCIe 4.0 speeds with the SN850.
HDD		860 QVO 2TB Samsung £195 Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to an HDD.
CASE		600C Corsair £135 If you're going big on parts, you should grab a case that has plenty of room for upgrades down the line. This one will do just fine.
DISPLAY		Nitro XV273K Acer £780 This one's an easy choice – 4K and 144Hz for under a grand is an offer we can't refuse, and neither should you.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £210 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“I was pointing an LMG at enemies who could be killed by a sneeze”

Cheap thrills and sniper duels in **BATTLEFIELD 2042**'s player-created modes.

I recently learned about ‘false epiphanies’. Apparently, the euphoric sensation you feel when you solve a puzzle can be triggered whether or not you’ve actually found the correct solution, and because we associate that ‘eureka’ feeling with being right, it can fool us into believing we’ve genuinely uncovered a hidden truth. The Vice article I read was talking about psychedelic drugs, but while killing time in a *Battlefield 2042* Portal server, it occurred to me that I was experiencing something similar. A ‘false killstreak’ let’s say.

Portal allows *Battlefield 2042* players to design and host their own game modes, and they range from sophisticated deathmatch variants to

TYLER WILDE



THIS MONTH
Survived the zombie apocalypse.

ALSO PLAYED
Sifu,
The Anacrusis

the shooter equivalent of *Cookie Clicker*. The server I was in was the latter type: a custom ‘zombies’ mode that pit a few players against dozens of knife-wielding AI soldiers who spawned with a single hitpoint each. There was no challenge. I could’ve just sat in a tank the whole time – a known zombie weakness – but even on foot I was never in danger. I was pointing an LMG at enemies who could be killed by a sneeze.

I may as well have been holding down my left mouse button with my PC turned off, and yet I kept on

ABOVE: Concrete is a bad surface on which to hide, it turns out.

shooting. That’s what I’m attributing to the false killstreak effect.

The sound *Battlefield 2042* plays when you score a kill is a sort of high-pitched bullet flyby – a pffzzp – which upon analysis seems like an odd choice. *Call of Duty: Warzone* uses a deep, chunky sound for kills. It’s very agreeable, though, as is the expanding red reticle that appears. Since those effects normally coincide with a kill against a player in one of *Battlefield 2042*’s standard modes, they trigger a little rush of euphoria that’s multiplied when they come in quick succession. It’s like endless spoonfuls of hot soup on a cold day.

IT’S LIKE ENDLESS SPOONFULS OF HOT SOUP ON A COLD DAY



The sensation caused by a steadily rising K/D ratio even tricked me into believing that I was actually doing a good job for a while. The illusion stopped working so well when I took a break from shooting and realised that the zombies were hopelessly thwarted by me standing on top of a shipping container. The false killstreak effect was fully broken when I casually walked over to an objective with almost no resistance.

GONE SNIPIN'

Perhaps sensing that I needed to recalibrate my brain's reward centres, I switched to a hardcore snipers-only mode – essentially the opposite of the PvE zombies mode. Long, eventless stretches were interrupted by little bursts of excitement. It's a lot like fishing, which I love, but you don't have to hurt any fish, which I don't love. Just what I needed.

It's surprising to me how bad of a rap *Battlefield 2042* continues to get. The criticisms aren't necessarily wrong – it did launch with lots of bugs and the maps are somewhat abstract and it could benefit from more guns – but they don't make it unfun. I can't remember the last time I played a goofy custom mode in an FPS that wasn't CS:GO. ■



“You never know what to expect”

Embracing the odd in **ELDEN RING**

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Wore a giant bug as a hat and shot insanity out of his eyes.

ALSO PLAYED
Legends of Runeterra,
OlliOlli World

The open world in *Elden Ring* has hit PC gaming like a boss attack with a 15 second wind-up. Its map, bereft of nagging icons, has sucked players in like few before it. But the most important thing about *Elden Ring*'s world isn't that it's bereft of icons and quest markers – it's how *weird* it is.

On the surface, the Lands Between might seem like your average medieval fantasy realm. Soldiers in chainmail patrol the roads, wolves prowl the woods, and skeletons lurk in ancient tombs.

But past that veneer, weirdness lurks around every corner. A mad king steals limbs to graft onto his increasingly grotesque body. Freakish animal hybrids rise up in rebellion against their human masters. A church contains not a priest, but a giant tortoise in a pope hat.

RING THE CHANGES

There's horror there, feeding into the atmosphere of vulnerability and oppression created by the combat system. But there's also just pure absurdity, and, crucially, humour.

That's what makes *Elden Ring*'s exploration feel so meaningful and exciting, where in so many open world games it has no drama at all: you never know what to expect. Heading down some strange path, you could find almost anything at the end – maybe mundane, but maybe disgusting, or hilarious, or ludicrous. Every item you pick up could be anything from a piece of fruit to a baby octopus you can wear on your head. And that's the absolute key to making the act of discovery feel meaningful – filling the world with the unexpected, training you to see every find as a possible surprise.

It's the complete opposite philosophy to so many other, comparable games. For all their great strengths and spectacle, games like *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* take huge pains to remove surprise. They firmly establish the categories of things that can be found, show where they can be found, and often exactly how many of each exist.

Different games serve different roles – there's no one true way to make an open world. But it's hard not to feel like almost all of them would benefit from sprinkling in at least a little more strangeness. ■



“Clearly this was the kind of gem I’d been missing out on”

Remembering that singleplayer games exist with **THE FORGOTTEN CITY**

The pandemic fundamentally changed my relationship with games. Sure, I was no stranger to online gaming before we spent over a year hiding away from a virus, but during lockdown multiplayer games were pretty much all I played. And even when I wasn’t hanging out with others, I was playing them solo, because they all have season passes and aspirational end game items that I can’t help but want.

I can sense your collective judgement, and that’s fair. By most metrics, playing thousands of hours of *Destiny 2* is not a ‘good’ use of one’s ‘time’. But the combined expansion launches of *Guild Wars 2: End of Dragons* and *Destiny 2: The Witch Queen* meant the trend was set to continue. At least until a storm hit the UK and knocked my internet out.

Faced with a Saturday without any access to live service games, I turned instead to the assortment of releases that I’d previously downloaded in the hope of one day finding time to check them out. Of

PHIL SAVAGE



THIS MONTH
Got MMO withdrawal symptoms.

ALSO PLAYED
Guild Wars 2,
Destiny 2

the list, *The Forgotten City* stood out: a short game about history and philosophy. A quiet game for a quiet weekend with no distractions. It reviewed well, and even won some awards – clearly this was the kind of gem I’d been missing out on.

FRIED GOLD

I finished the game in one sitting, dragged through by my desire to unearth the mystery of this weird Roman town and the small handful of citizens trapped in it. There’s a lot going on. You travel here from the future. You’re in a time loop,

repeating the same day over and over. The citizens are living under the Golden Rule, where, if anyone commits a sin, the entire population is turned into golden statues.

And so you start unravelling clues, using your knowledge of previous loops and the fact that you can carry items between them to engineer the perfect day. Rather than win the heart of Andie MacDowell, your Groundhog Day fun is in service of a handful of philosophical questions.

It would be satisfying to tell you that, in finding the secret to *The Forbidden City*’s tangled musings on morality, I also found myself. That I renounced multiplayer gaming’s over-reliance on systems designed to drive player retention. That didn’t happen. I thought *The Forgotten City* was good and a worthy way to spend an afternoon. And then, when the internet was restored, I jumped straight back online.

Still, it was nice to be reintroduced to games that can provide a compelling experience without the need to ever go back. Perhaps some other games will get played after all. First, though, these new *Destiny* guns aren’t going to earn themselves. ■

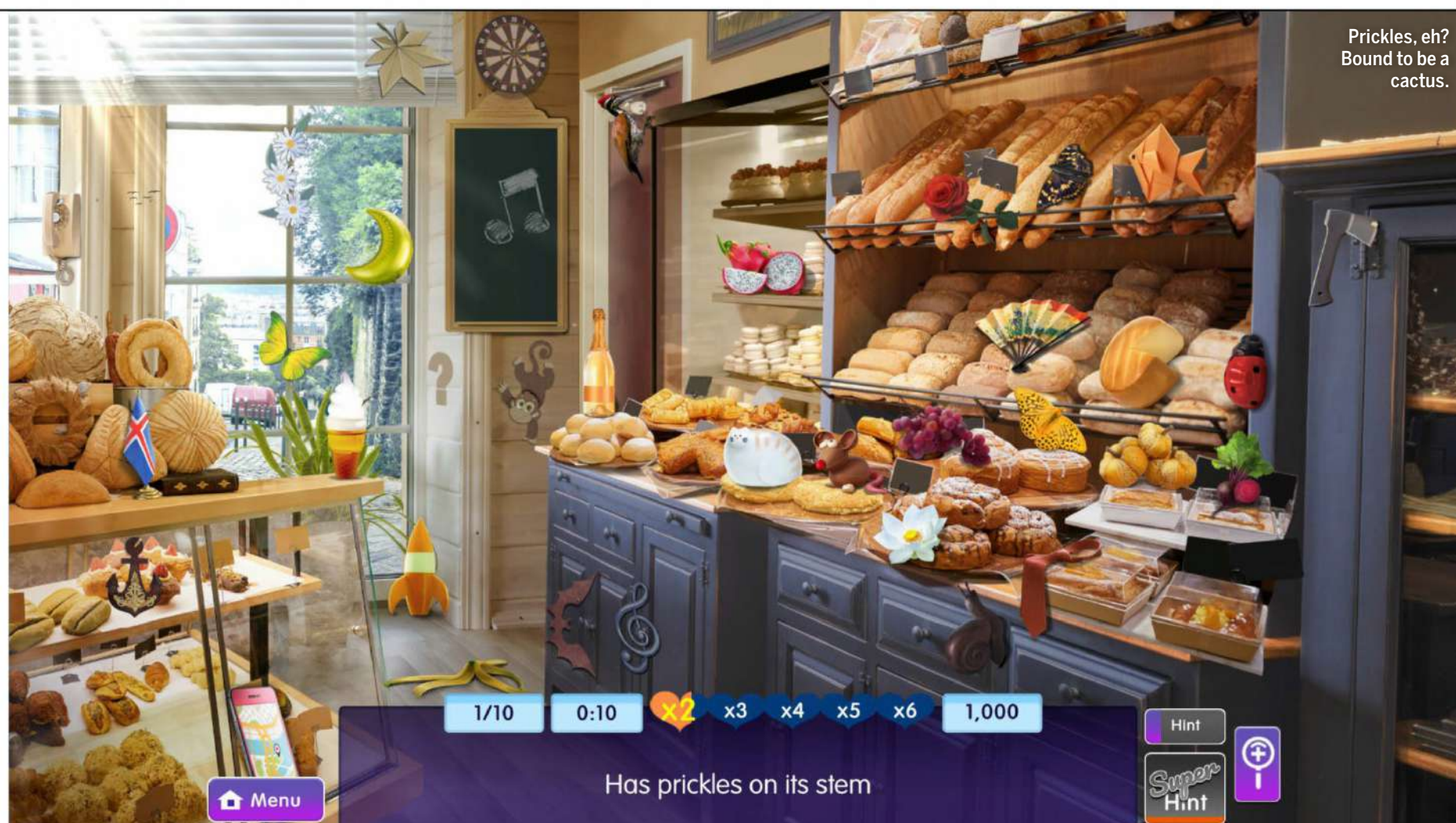
A QUIET GAME FOR A QUIET WEEKEND WITH NO DISTRACTIONS



LEFT: Also: there are ziplines for some reason.



BELOW: The Golden Rule is quite literal.



Prickles, eh?
Bound to be a
cactus.

“Finding twelve cats in under two minutes can be put on a CV, right?”

Finding oddities around the French capital in **FIRST TIME IN PARIS**

Although I enjoy hidden object games that are centred around darker tales, there's nothing I appreciate more in the genre than a game that's oozing with cheese – and I say that with zero shame. My love for these games dates back to the mid-to-late 2000s, when the Spintop Games' website fell into my lap, and I fell into a hole of trying to do some damage control as an incredibly busy wedding planner in the *Dream Day* series.

Since then, I've been searching high and low for a title that brings me the same level of light-hearted escapism that *Dream Day Wedding* does. Thankfully, I've managed to find just that in *First Time in Paris*, a game that evokes the exact same joy I'd felt all those years ago. It's an element for me that's paramount to a hidden object game; being able to escape from reality for a few hours within its story and mini games.

First Time in Paris follows mother and daughter duo Kate and Nicole as

VICTORIA PHEASEY



THIS MONTH
Uncovering soufflé related scandals on The Seine.

ALSO PLAYED
Dream Day Wedding: Viva Las Vegas

they take in the sights of the French capital. Travel blogger Kate uses the picturesque location and delicacies as inspiration to write her first piece commissioned by a struggling hotel, all in hopes to save the business from going under. And by clicking away at the random items on my list, I'm vowing to leave no stone unturned in saving the Hôtel Hospitalité.

OBJECT LESSON

As I click my way through Paris, Kate uncovers some culinary based

I'M VOWING TO LEAVE NO STONE UNTURNED IN SAVING THE HÔTEL HOSPITALITÉ

revelations from brasseries over a passed down soufflé recipe, while I manage to earn myself achievements along the way. Although I haven't gotten to the root of the problem as of yet, I know I'll be just as stunned as Kate when the truth is revealed. In the meantime, I still have quite a lot of items to uncover – finding twelve cats in under two minutes can be put on a CV, right?

Alongside its whimsical story, its visuals are lovely. All the random objects are wonderfully detailed, and sifting through them all in the middle of vibrant locations is a treat. Whether you're solving anagrams to find items or silhouette matching, the added shimmer of the night sky around the Eiffel Tower is strangely immersive. Subtle movements within the environments aren't enough to distract you from your main objective. Yet those minute details really breathe life into *First Time in Paris*, bringing a sense of reality to locales, even if you might also find a scooter with a moustache outside a bistro. Perfect escapism. Now where on earth is that croissant? ■



STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC

The MMO's new expansion has gone down like the Holiday Special. *By Fraser Brown*

The new *Legacy of the Sith* expansion has not quite been the crescendo of the MMO's ten-year anniversary celebrations BioWare was surely hoping for, with a lot of players questioning if it even deserves to be called an expansion.

The issues players have raised are pretty consistent: *Legacy of the Sith*'s story is over and done with quickly, there are plenty of significant bugs, the UI changes are an eyesore, and the radical changes to classes, now called combat styles, are a step back.

Even by the standards of *Onslaught*, the small expansion that came before it, *Legacy of the Sith* does feel pretty slight when it comes to missions. At a couple of hours long, it's brisk, and once you're done you'll need to wait for the daily zone and operation, as BioWare is still working on them at time of writing. But it does come with some significant changes elsewhere – particularly the class and story overhaul.

NEW ORDER

With my obsession with alt characters, the freedom to play through the Bounty Hunter storyline as a Vanguard or start as a Jedi Sage and eventually become a Sith Sorcerer has made me ecstatic. And there are secondary combat styles now, letting you effectively switch

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
February 15

DEVELOPER
BioWare Austin

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

LINK
swtor.com

classes on the fly – at least with the appropriate legacy unlock.

This change hasn't drawn the ire of players, but other class changes definitely have. Their transformation into combat styles came with a huge overhaul of abilities, which has been more subtractive than additive. Some have been removed, while others have been turned into choices, where you can only pick one of several you could have previously used together.

Fundamental abilities, the stuff that's in your core rotation, have mostly been left alone, but several combat styles do feel like they've been defanged. Perhaps this was to encourage players to use their secondary combat style, but getting players to use a new feature by making an old one less effective probably isn't the best way to go about it. And activating different loadouts requires players to be out of combat and buy the aforementioned legacy unlock if they want to swap outside of a few specific areas.

There are also strange incongruities where it's hard to tell if it's a bug, a missing asset, or a weird choice, like new monochromatic icons that are neither as evocative or

as clear as the old ones. The old class symbols were these colourful representations of the weapons and abilities that made them iconic: lightning for the Inquisitor, a flamethrower for the Bounty Hunter. The new origin symbols that replace them look like black and white doodles of heads: a guy in a hood,



COMBAT STYLES FEEL LIKE THEY'VE BEEN DEFANGED

another guy in a hood, a guy in a hat, some helmets.

PEST CONTROL

Despite the expansion's delay and the pushing back of several features, it still feels rushed. The UI looks cheap and unfinished, somehow worse than it did when players saw a work-in-progress version in the PTR. And there's plenty of bugs still needing squashed, like the one that spawned me in a random room, trapping me there until I teleported to my ship.

With the anniversary celebrations all leading up to this, it's hard not to be very disappointed. There's some great stuff in here, especially for roleplayers and the alt-obsessed, but it's surrounded by additions that seem unfinished and not up to the quality you'd expect from an MMO that was originally one of the most expensive games ever made.

Following the less-than-great *Onslaught*, it does feel like BioWare Austin no longer has the team or the budget to keep expanding *SWTOR* like it used to. Of course, the class overhaul must have required a lot of time and resources, but this is a story-driven MMO, and a two-hour adventure on Manann doesn't cut it.

BioWare Austin confirmed that it had no plans to end *The Old Republic* any time soon, which was a relief, but I hope the future of the MMO is better than *Legacy of the Sith*. ■

STYLIN' AND PROFILIN'

How the new combat styles work



1 Instead of picking a class at character creation, you now start by picking an origin, determining your personal story.



2 You select the mechanics of your character, and you're free to mix and match, as long as they're both Tech or Force.



3 If you want a Bounty Hunter who uses rifles, you can pick the Sniper style. Or you can be a Consular who's secretly a Sith.



4 You can pick a second style, switching between them in specific areas or, with the right legacy perk, anywhere you want.





I hope you've brought waterproof robes for Manann.



ABOVE: Malgus is back, and up to no good.

LEFT: The UI is awful, but character creation has still been improved.

BELOW: It's a lot of fun being a secret Sith in the Jedi storylines.



Aw. Snark. I missed you, little buddy.



ABOVE: Valve scrapped this water tentacle monster. I can see why.

RIGHT: Hi, need a ride back to Opposing Force? Well hop in, pal!





HALF-LIFE 2: OVERCHARGED

Supercharge Gordon Freeman. *By Chris Livingston*

The enduring appeal of Gordon Freeman is that he was just this regular guy, you know? He was a mere scientist who, as it turned out, also happened to be extremely skilled at fighting off aliens and blowing away the army and even taking down government assassins. He broke the mould of videogame heroes being career badasses who were already ultraviolent killing machines from the start, letting players imagine that they too, when the chips were down, might have some incredible survival skills rise to the surface too... no matter how nerdy they might be.

That said, it is kind of fun to play through *Half-Life 2* as a total badass in a non-stop action movie. I should know, because I've been doing it with the *Half-Life 2: Overcharged* mod. It turns the dial on *Half-Life 2* all the way up, throwing in tons of new weapons, lots of new enemies, and all sorts of other enhancements.

I didn't read too much about the mod before installing it because I wanted there to be some surprises. And there were. Almost immediately. After the lengthy opening of the game, in which Freeman goes through about 30 or so minutes without even picking up a gun, I finally dashed through the alleys of City 17 and beat my first Combine Cop to death with my crowbar. Then I picked up his gun, shot a second Metrocop, and was surprised to find I could pick up his gun, too. In *Overcharged*, Freeman can dual-wield pistols. Already I feel more like Max Payne than Gordon Freeman.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November 16, 2004

DEVELOPER
Valve

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
half-life.com

That wasn't the only early surprise. While I was running and double-gunning Metrocops, I turned a corner and heard a familiar whoop-whoop sound. It was a Houndeye, those weird yellow

I TURNED A CORNER AND HEARD A FAMILIAR WHOOP-WHOOP

dog-like monsters from the original *Half-Life*. They were actually meant to be included in *Half-Life 2* at one point, but Valve decided otherwise. The makers of the *Overcharged* mod, on the other hand, figured the more the merrier, and I ran into a whole buncha Houndeyes before I was even out of the city.

SQUID GAME

Houndeyes aren't the only visitors from other *Half-Life* games present in *Overcharged*. Not by a long shot. Bullsquids, those gross goo-spitting monsters that don't have a lot in common with either bulls or squids? There are plenty of those, too. Remember Pit Drones from *Half-Life: Opposing Force*? Toothy little brown guys with praying mantis arms? I ran into a bunch of them, too. And when I started driving that terrible *Half-Life 2* car along the coast, I

CHARGE!

Games that could use more guns



CALL OF JUAREZ: GUNSLINGER

A six-shooter is nice, but why not throw in a gauss cannon?



ELDEN RING

Parrying, blocking, dodging... so much effort when a BFG from *Doom* could end fights quickly.



STARDEW VALLEY

You can grow sunflowers, so why not grow gunflowers? They're flowers that are... also guns.



CREED: RISE TO GLORY

These boxing matches would be so much easier if Adonis had a super shotgun.

spotted a bunch of Shock Troopers, those weird bug soldiers also from *Opposing Force*. I guess it's nice Freeman is finally getting to fight them. Why should Adrian Shephard have all the fun?

There are even creatures Valve never put into any *Half-Life* game present in *Overcharged*. A very early *Half-Life 2* trailer showed a bizarre water tentacle impaling a Combine soldier, but that monster (called a Hydra) didn't make it into the game because Valve discovered it wasn't fun to fight. But as I was driving the airboat through the canals, there were several Hydras popping up from the depths and trying to kill me. There were also plans to add an enemy called the Combine Cremator, a ghoulish looking cloaked figure who roamed City 17 using a plasma thrower to dispose of corpses. It's in *Overcharged*. Scared the hell out of me. I was expecting just about anything at that point, but not that.

The Combine soldiers have gotten a few upgrades, too. I wasn't even that far in before I saw one of those Overwatch Elite soldiers, the ones dressed in white with the single glowing red eye. But it was doing a bunch of backflips. This mod basically took a Black Ops agent from the original *Half-Life* and mashed it up with a Combine soldier.

Luckily there's lots of new weapons beyond just dual pistols to deal with these new and old enemies. I'm not sure how many guns I'd collected by the time I finished playing, but there was a pistol with a laser sight – something I definitely would have been happy to have in any *Half-Life 2* playthrough – a proper scoped sniper rifle to compliment my rebar-throwing crossbow, a heavy belt-fed machine gun that I suspect might have come over from *Counter-Strike*, and a quick-firing shotgun that is definitely from *Counter-Strike*.

And there's still more. Some call it a Snark, some call it a squeak grenade, but it's a cute, pudgy little alien bug you can hold and look at fondly until you chuck it at someone, at which point it'll skitter over to them, leap and bite them, and eventually explode. It's gotten a makeover since Freeman had it in the original *Half-Life*, but it's wonderful to have it back in my hand again where it belongs. At least until I throw it in someone's face. Another familiar weapon turns up, too, this

one from *Opposing Force*: the Shock Roach, another Race X bug that warms up to Freeman and obliterates his enemies. There's a gauss rifle, a pipe wrench for when you want to bash someone with something other than a crowbar... hell, there's even a molotov cocktail.

WARP SPEED

But I think my favourite weapon in *Overcharged* is the warp cannon, which any *HL2* player would immediately find familiar. That's because you'll usually find it strapped to the nose of a Strider and aimed directly at you. Well, now Freeman has a warp cannon, too. It makes a cool noise and a real mess.

Speaking of mess, I immediately noticed *Overcharged* was, well, really messy. Blast an alien with a gun close up, and your hands and weapon wind up splattered with goo. Gun down a few Combine soldiers and you'll get blood all over your gun and gloves. It fades eventually but it certainly adds to the action movie feel of the mod.

And I don't think I've ever seen a mod with quite so much customisation before. In the advanced settings, you find toggles for just about everything. Don't like the blood and goo splattered all over your hands? You can turn it off. You can even dictate what else the blood splatters onto, like ragdolls or other

models. Do the Combine Cremators creep you out? You can make it so they're passive instead of hostile. You can turn on and off friendly fire for your rebel squad, you can choose if you want Freeman's body to be 3D rendered or just the typical floating cam, you can tweak ragdoll settings to determine what they'll collide with, and make adjustments to the HUD and crosshair.



I THINK MY FAVOURITE WEAPON IS THE WARP CANNON

KICK OFF

There's way more. In fact, an entire tab in the advanced settings is dedicated to gunplay so you can switch off dual pistols, allow items like fire extinguishers and Metrocop stunsticks to be grabbed and used as weapons, and even toggles for iron sights if you really want to look down the barrel of Freeman's many, many new guns. There are also a whole host of sliders to tweak weapons settings like how long the tau and gauss cannon beams last, how long the AR2 energy ball bounces around, and even how long the warp cannon's black hole lasts. It's shocking just how many settings can be fiddled with, though I barely did any fiddling myself. I just turned on anything that was off and went to town.

Maybe best of all, you can even tick a box that gives Freeman a kicking attack. Yes, Freeman can finally kick stuff just like Duke Nukem. It's nice to use Freeman's feet for something, and that something is kicking Metrocops in the gut. Or kicking open doors instead of opening them by tapping E to use the handle.

I realise that most of this doesn't really sound like a *Half-Life* game at all, but *HL2* has been around for nearly 20 years at this point, so why not turn it into an adrenaline fuelled action movie with a bunch of aliens that aren't even supposed to be there?

Weirdly, the only thing this mod doesn't overcharge is Freeman's flashlight. Neither the major overhaul of *Half-Life 2: Overcharged*, nor Freeman's scientific mind, can invent a flashlight battery that works for more than ten seconds. ■

FOR SCIENCE!

Rating the scientists of the Half-Life universe



GORDON FREEMAN

Does science once by pushing a shopping cart into a scanner.
Score: 0/10



ISAAC KLEINER

Understands teleportation doesn't know how to keep his headcrab out of the teleporter.
Score: 6/10



ELI VANCE

Built Dog, which is awesome. Built the Scout Car too. Made first contact with the Vorts: awesome again.
Score: 8/10



JUDITH MOSSMAN

Being a double agent isn't cool, but being a triple agent is. She found the Borealis.
Score: 7/10



WALLACE BREEN

It's not quite canon but his brain might have been uploaded into an alien slug. That's pretty sciency.
Score: 4/10



THIS GUY

This cleansuit guy in *Opposing Force* always makes me laugh. Maybe it's the square visor.
Score: 10/10

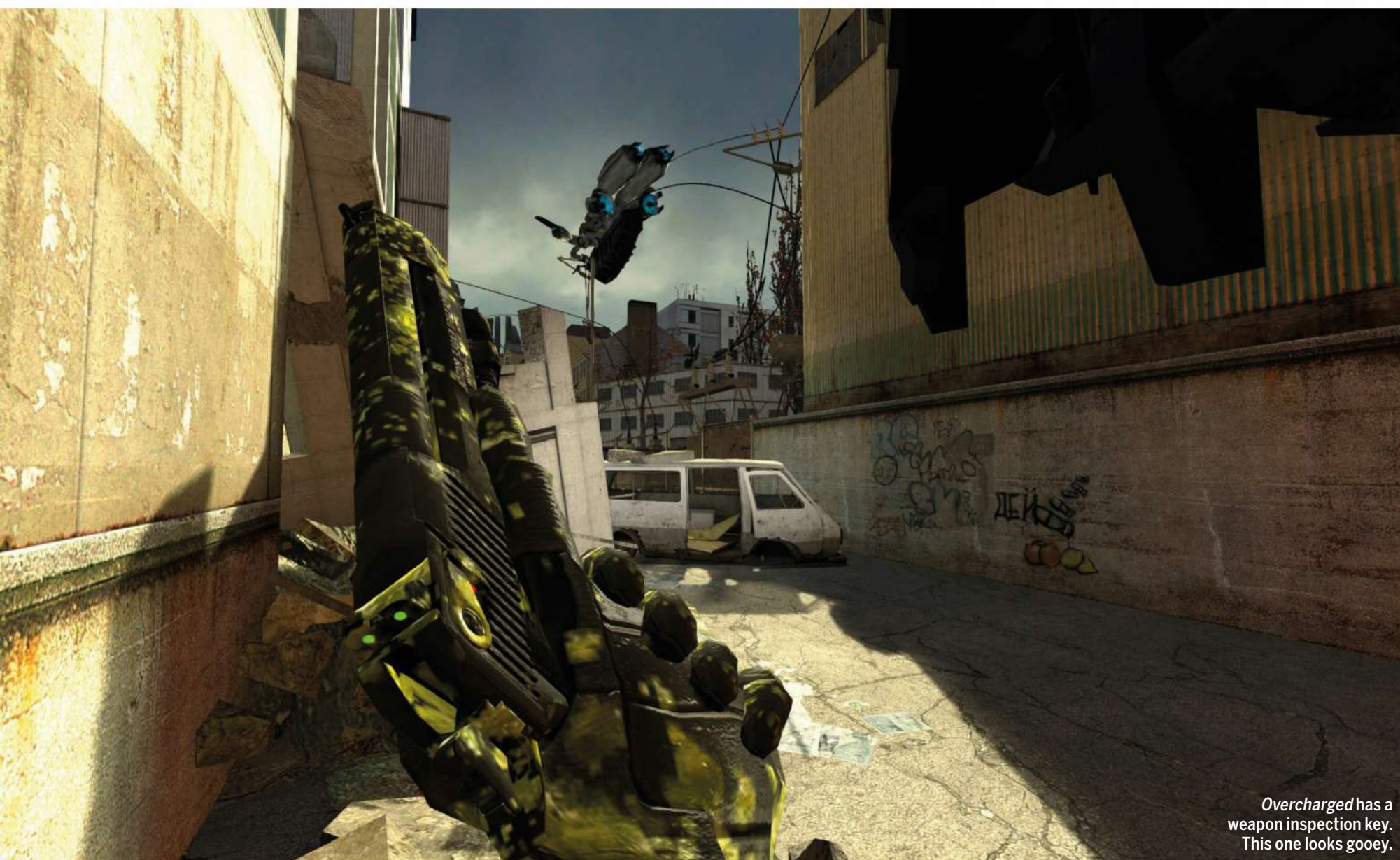
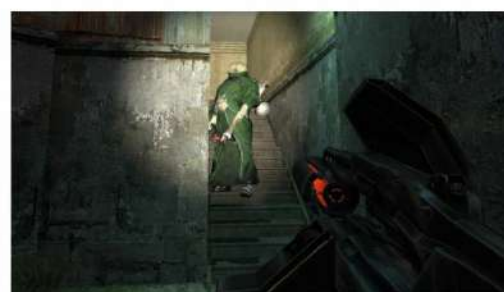


I am not complaining about the Vort companion. He's a real help.



ABOVE: The crowbar is no longer Freeman's only tool.

LEFT: You can really turn up the blood settings. It even gets on your guns.



Overcharged has a weapon inspection key. This one looks gooey.



DEFEAT DAEMONS IN

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III

Face the forces of Chaos and emerge victorious. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Hard

TIME
20 hours

VITAL LINKS

Daemons of Chaos units guide:
bit.ly/3GWS5w2

Boris Ursus unlock:
bit.ly/3LGYnDh

Campaign tips:
bit.ly/3LEMuOh



CAMPAIGN HOLIDAY

1 The early campaign is the calm before the storm, so grab as much land as you can to secure your empire. Defeat nearby enemies, then move onto Greenskins, Skaven, and Ogres to get settlements and make other factions like you, while eliminating any future threats.



BUILD TO LAST

2 Prioritise growth buildings to upgrade settlements and get better units while nurturing your economy. Establish trade and build resource production to boost your income. If playing as Cathay, dispatch a caravan and watch the gold roll in.



GOOD NEIGHBOURS

3 Friends are few in a world filled with monsters, so make allies where you can. Establish non-aggression pacts, military access, and alliances with factions you can confederate. Be sure to build outposts in allied settlements to pilfer their units.



WEAPONS FREE

4 A faction lives and dies on the strength of its armies, so take advantage of Kislev and Cathay's powerful ranged units and upkeep reductions. You need a strong frontline, missile infantry, cavalry to protect your flanks, and artillery for blasting monsters.



MAGIC TRICKS

5 Want to slow a charging enemy to glacial speed? Or reflect arrows back at them? Kislev and Cathay's lores of magic bolster their battlefield playstyle, to protect troops, disrupt advancing foes, and punish packed infantry. Use them well.



FROM HELL

6 Rifts provide ingress into the Chaos realms with your legendary lord, but they work both ways. Armies can fight a battle to close them, while agents can pay gold. Seal those suckers before you're drowned in daemons and corruption.



POX POPS

7 Nurgle's green-gilled armies advance like a zombie horde. Take out their fast-flanking Rotflies and Plague Drones with missiles then blaze away at their frontline. Artillery with flaming damage slows regen, while magical damage cuts through their tankiness.

THEY'VE GOT GUTS *Acquaint yourself with the fearsome Ogre*



1

ALL OGRE

The wayward Ogre tribes have spread the length and breadth of the Warhammer world with a humble goal in their hearts: steal what you can't eat, and eat what you can't steal.

2

PIN CUSHIONS

Though a lumbering tide of hungry, hungry humanoids may be unnerving, know that a strong line of spearmen and a few volleys of missile fire sends these ruffians running back to the mountains.

3

FRIENDS NOT FOOD

Ever the entrepreneurial spirits when it comes to their next meal, Ogres can be hired as mercenaries for your army if any region a camp is present, and make for excellent shock troops.



STUPID SEXY SLAANESH

8

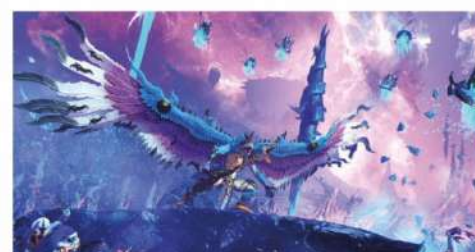
Servants of the Lord of Pleasure love a good kicking, so will charge headlong and hit hard in the flanks with cavalry. Stifle their advance with some magic and missiles, however, and it won't be long before their lack of armour catches up to them.



BLOODBATH

9

Khorne's armies favour charging in to blend infantry, so bring a strong front line and use armour-piercing missiles to crack those tin cans open. Beware their fast Flesh-Hounds and ultra-heavy Skullcrushers, who'll punch you in the flanks.



BIRD BRAINS

10

When facing Tzeentch, expect magic, overwhelming ranged firepower, and flying units. To avoid them sowing chaos in your ranks, adopt a spread formation, use missiles to focus-fire flying threats, and heavy cavalry to trample Blue and Pink Horrors.



THE GREAT GAME

11

Expect a trial in each of the Chaos realms to unlock a final battle, but remember this one simple tip: your competitors can't win if you kill them. Take advantage of the boons to replenish your army as well as the encamp stance that allows more recruitment.



DAEMON SOULS

12

The final battle is within reach! Capture victory points to summon backup, build fortifications, and refill unit ammo with the replenishments button in the bottom right. Take down the Daemon Prince and victory is yours.



KEEPING THE PEACE IN JUST CAUSE 4

Can't everybody just get along?

By Luke Kemp

When your home is ruled with a ruthless dictator's tightly-clenched iron fist, this is *not* an excuse to engage in needless violence. When evil rears its ugly head, you should always engage it in polite debate. That's how the Nazis were defeated in World War II, after all. My Rico therefore is an odiously – er, admirably – determined centrist, on a quest to defuse conflict at every opportunity; and I think I've found the perfect way to do it.

One of the rebels tells me to raise an “army of chaos”. The idea is that the more trouble I cause across the island – handily tracked by a Chaos Meter at the top of the screen – the more people will rally to my cause. Traumatized by the needlessly violent intro mission however, I don't want help from the sorts of horrid individuals that would be attracted by that behaviour. Instead, I'm on my way to find and collect the cow gun as peacefully as possible. Yes, cow gun. This is a gun that turns people into cows. And you know how many violent conflicts have been started by cows? Less than seven. Let's do this.

A little research tells me that the cow gun is located in the Vaivenes region of the island. Opening up the map, it looks distressingly far from my starting point of Hanasacha. Nonetheless, I have a powerful grappling hook, a parachute, and a wingsuit. I'm confident of getting there relatively quickly, and in style. So off I go.

My initial plan is to hitchhike, *Just Cause* style. Not long after starting to jog along the nearest road, a car drives past that seems to be going in more or less the right direction. I use the grapple to hurl myself onto the roof. As soon as I do so, much to my surprise, the woman driving cries, “What are you doing up there? Go away!” I mean, it's a perfectly reasonable reaction, but many years of urban open world games have taught me to expect drivers that barely raise a digitised eyebrow at a stranger jumping onto the roof of their car. I apologise profusely, hop off, and allow her to continue on her way.

CAUSE I SAID SO

Not long after, a rebel truck appears travelling in the same direction. These guys are my friends, *they* won't mind! And sure enough, when I jump onto the roof, the

only reaction is for them to ask where I want to go. With no way of actually *telling* them, I'm happy for them to continue in the direction that they were originally going. Well, for about ten seconds, anyway.

An enemy helicopter appears, and starts to exchange gunfire with the truck. Horrified at the idea of somebody getting hurt on my account, I give the rebel manning the truck's turret a friendly tap with my grappling hook. Although this works pretty well – he stops firing, remains alive, and we even somehow manage to lose the helicopter, eventually – he grabs his head with both hands and, in obvious distress, shakes it to and fro non-stop for the full 60 seconds or so that I watch him.

I SPOT SOMETHING THAT LOOKS A BIT EVIL LAIR-Y AT THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN

Somewhat disturbed, I jump back down to the road and give up on hitchhiking.

I decide to take a shortcut across the mountains instead, grappling towards the rock and then launching myself into the air with the parachute. It's pretty here; peaceful, too. In fact, looking down at the roads and surrounding area on my travels, the country of Solís seems rather calm overall, a clear indication that it's the overreaction of the rebels that is causing all the trouble. I become more determined than ever to put a stop to their shenanigans.

Having now covered a significant distance, I spot something that looks a bit evil lair-y at the top of the mountain range. Probably a government installation (and therefore trustworthy and harmless), but I make a detour just to check that everybody there is behaving. With several hundred metres still to go, however, heavy ordnance begins to rain on me without warning. I try to retreat, but it's no use; within seconds, I'm dead. Things look chillingly familiar when I respawn, and checking the map confirms it; I'm back where I started in Hanasacha. I let out a pained whimper, and start again.

I head back to the mountains, making sure to steer clear of whatever that building was.

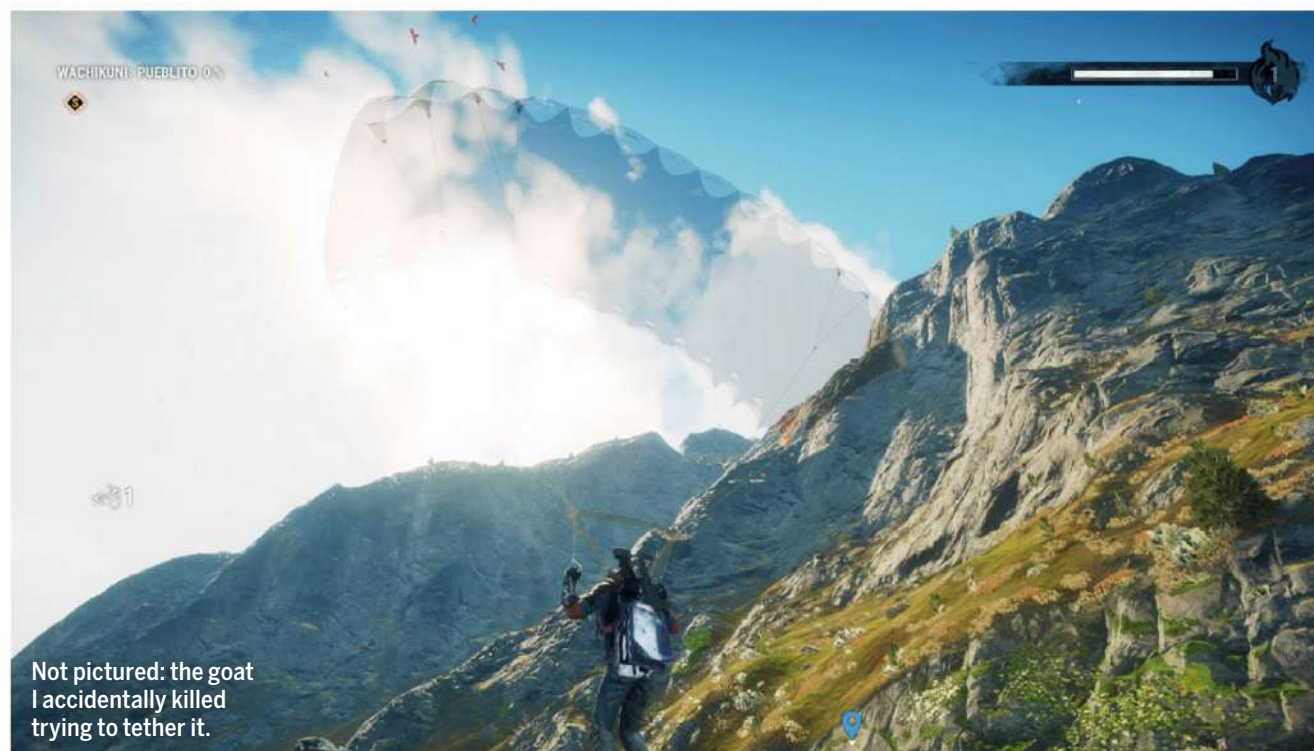
I'm trying to decide how much comfort I take in the knowledge that at least it's safe from rebel interference, when I spot a helicopter flying towards my distant marker. That'll be a perfect way to cover a lot of distance, and maybe I can hang from underneath without them even knowing I'm there! I give chase, but it's pretty fast. By the time I catch up, it's landed at some sort of enemy checkpoint. Before I can decide how best to approach the situation, I'm spotted, and under fire. Even worse, the Chaos Meter has triggered a multiplier! I really need to get out of here, and fast.

HELI LET LOOSE

The helicopter, which on my approach has taken off once more,

THE RULES

1. Keep the island as peaceful as possible by any means.
2. Do not kill anybody on either side under any circumstances.
3. Ensure the safety and happiness of all civilians I find.



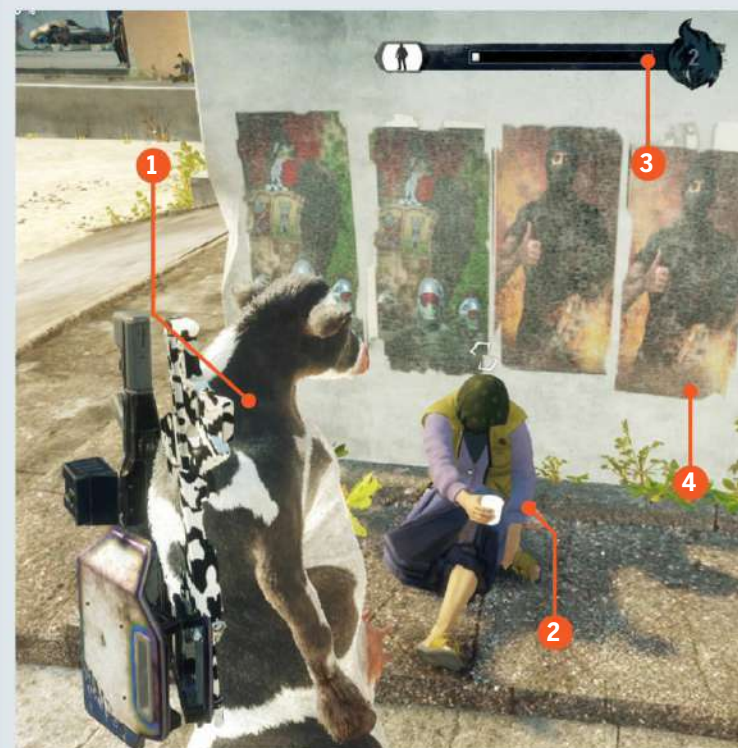
Not pictured: the goat I accidentally killed trying to tether it.

The Chaos Meter has calmed down, I (probably) didn't kill anybody, and I now have a helicopter. Result! I have a brief scare when I'm almost at my destination, when I come under fire from a jet, but I quickly land and manage to lose them on foot. I grapple down from the top of the hill I landed on, carefully scope out the area, and then – I see it. The cow gun!

As they take cover behind a gate, one of the cows throws a grenade. I grapple to safety, hop the fence and quickly tether them together. This stuns them temporarily, so I steal the truck before they recover, trying to process what just happened. I don't get a chance though, as I soon find myself being chased by a group of military vehicles. One flies past me and straight into a Mini, which promptly explodes. "Terribly sorry!" I cry, guilty in the knowledge that was my fault.

The cow gun's secondary fire turns *me* into a cow, so I jump out of the truck, and use what I think is a pretty good disguise. Unfortunately, as I'm running away as fast as my little hooves will carry me, I'm hit by another civilian vehicle, which quickly catches fire and then (of course) explodes. The Chaos Meter is mocking me with another 2x multiplier. I desperately run, grapple and fly until, somehow, I manage to escape and coax the Chaos Meter back to normal.

The moment before the horrible accident



4 I hoof to admit, I didn't notice these at the time.

I open my map to check the surrounding area. I'm distressed to see a "squads received" message as, despite my best efforts, the Chaos level has still crept up to 2. I tap

B a few times to exit the map screen, but I tap it one too many times. As a result, I hurl my grappling hook into the poor woman's face at point-blank range, killing her instantly. Horrified at what I've done, I run further into town, changing back into less conspicuous human form.

It turns out that Vista Futura is a calm, peaceful place (apart from the recent unsolved murder of a homeless woman). Why on *Earth* would I want to sow chaos and ruin life for these people? Still, I do come across an unsettling sight, so of course I do my best to help.

I find a man terrified of... something. He runs around agitated, and knocks on random doors, begging for entry. Confusingly, at one point, a woman appears to be filming him on her phone before



I TAKE AIM AND TURN HIM INTO A COW, HOPING THAT THIS WILL CALM HIM DOWN

walking away. I could follow her – see if she's part of some nefarious scheme that this poor man is caught up in – but I decide to stick with him instead. I follow him around, and his behaviour doesn't change. He continues to run in agitation from door to door, occasionally stopping to hold his head in fear. Now, I'm thinking, cows don't usually look distressed, do they? You certainly never see them knocking on strangers' doors and/or holding their heads. Hmm...

MUST BE FRIESIAN

I take aim and turn him into a cow, hoping that this will calm him down. *And it does!* As soon as he assumes bovine form, he confidently and calmly starts to walk

across the street on his hind legs. I stick with him to make sure he's OK, but his only concern seems to be the heavily armed man following him across town. I congratulate myself on a job well done, and move on to the nearby sports field.

I find three friends doing keepy uppies so, in the name of comedy, I turn them into cows. Unfortunately, it seems that the military takes a dim view of shooting citizens with *any* type of gun. Which is fair enough I suppose. I'm shot at instantly, and it takes less than a minute for multiple soldiers and military vehicles to appear, so I take a parked car and leave town to avoid endangering citizens. I hit somebody with the car on my way out, but they're probably fine.

I'm once again under fire from the ground and the air, but I'm feeling good. As the bullets whizz past and the rockets rain down, I smile. I helped people today, I made the island a slightly better place, and I did it (mostly) without violence. Once I'm in the clear, I'll return to Vista Futura, and settle down for a quiet life. Just me, my principles, and my surprisingly therapeutic cow gun. ■



FAR LEFT: That's some impressive parking.

LEFT: There goes the no claim bonus.



WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

PROGRAMMING ROBOTS IN

QUADRILATERAL COWBOY

Making little drones to do my bidding is super satisfying. *By Morgan Park*



LEFT: Sniping from a grassy knoll.

RIGHT: Everything in Quadrilateral Cowboy feels appropriately analogue.



I never thought I'd say there are too many games about hacking to keep up with, but it's true. There are dozens of games on the subject, but the problem is a lot of them are pretty similar. More often than not, the whole game takes place in a computer terminal, where you execute all sorts of illicit commands that, in theory, are making something happen somewhere else in the world.

Like an actual hacker that lives oceans away from their target, it's a realistic interpretation, but it's also unsatisfying. I want to step out of the terminal and see the results of my clever coding, and no game does that better than *Quadrilateral Cowboy*.

It's a puzzle game about heisting valuables from hard-to-reach places, all with nothing but an '80s computer deck and a few gadgets. Levels start out simple, punching in rudimentary commands like "door3.open (3)" to make door 3 open for three seconds. This gets you used to your deck's command line, but things don't get really interesting until you unlock two robots: the weevil drone and the briefcase gun.

FUN WITH ROBOTS

The weevil can crawl through small spaces the player can't fit through to open a door or window. If this were any other game, it would be the type of drone the player directly controls, but your only way to communicate with this four-legged robot is through commands punched in on your computer deck.

Even getting the thing set up to move is a multistep process – first

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
July 25, 2016

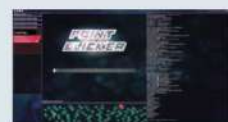
DEVELOPER
Blendo Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
blendogames.com/qc

HACK/SLASH

Our other favourite hacking games



HACKNET 2015
A story-based game about hacking into computers and gaining information. Played entirely from a computer screen.



WATCH DOGS 2 2016
A great stealth game that employs drones and security cameras to infiltrate compounds.



DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED 2016
The hacking is fun and honing it can carry you through a lot of the game.



HACKMUD 2016
A hacking MMO that goes so deep that you may want to learn some actual javascript before giving it a shot.

you need to set the weevil down somewhere, then start the appropriate program on your deck, set down your CCTV monitor within view of the deck, connect the weevil's camera feed to the monitor so you can see where it's going, and then start walking. You don't turn it by telling it left or right, but instead feed it degrees to adjust its radius ("turn -90" would be a full left turn).

Punching in every command one at a time can be tedious, but the game teaches you early on that it's smarter to type in several commands and separate them with a semicolon. Not

briefcase until you issue a 'deploy' command that reveals the small rifle turret within.

When I was given the briefcase gun, I naturally assumed I'd start seeing enemy guards to shoot, but it's actually a tool for pressing buttons from far away. Like the weevil, the gun's camera can link to the CCTV monitor for precise aiming. Fine tuning its aim can be a little tough because you need to input commands for its X and Y axis, but the fiddling is part of the fun here.

In one early level, you have to jack into a wall plug to open a high up window that happens to have a clear view of a button that turns off a laser grid. This is also where you're introduced to the 'blink' mechanic that lets you literally assign computer commands to eye blinks. Once I'd gone through the trouble of programming blinks, it felt super cool to blink once to make a laser grid vanish and blink twice to adjust the gun's aim to a higher button.

I wouldn't blame you if all of this programming sounds tedious. It does take some doing to get the simplest things done in *Quadrilateral Cowboy*, but that's the point. The puzzles are little more than new reasons to fiddle with your robots. The more you do it, the faster you get, the closer you feel to a god of machines that can bring a security system to its knees in the blink of an eye. ■

THINGS DON'T GET REALLY INTERESTING UNTIL YOU UNLOCK TWO ROBOTS

only can this save on time, but it's also a fun test of your ability to guesstimate how far the weevil needs to travel without inching forward little by little. Like actual programming languages, you can also save typing time by recalling previous commands with the up arrow key.

SHARPSHOOTER

The briefcase gun, unlocked a few missions after the weevil, is even cooler. As the name implies, the gadget appears like a normal



LEFT: Deploying my weevil drone for his next adventure.

RIGHT: The weevil is basically a camera with legs that can remotely activate objects.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES

The Goth family mansion in *The Sims 3* is a sprawling inspiration to build bigger.



THE SIMS 3

Back to the best building tools of the series. *By Lauren Morton*

For some, *The Sims* series is a wonderful sandbox simulation in which wacky fake people survive a gauntlet of unlikely house fires or where approximations of school crushes become spouses. For me, it's always been about the building. I've removed a few pool ladders in my day, but I've rarely given Live Mode the time of day since the original *The Sims*. It's always been about the architecture – learning to create floating houses tethered by staircases or designing mansions and realising I don't know what kinds of rooms mansions have. Piano rooms are a thing, right?

I happened to skip over *The Sims 3* – I was leaving for university and was really quite enamoured with MMOs when it launched – and now that I've

come back to it I've realised that I missed out on the best building game in the entire series. *The Sims 3* is bliss for a builder like me.

NEW OLD TOOLS

It's immediately more configurable than its follow up *The Sims 4*, starting with the neighbourhood editor. Unlike the tightly controlled neighbourhoods with pre-planned lots in the latest game, *Sims 3* allows you to place new lots in various sizes around the neighbourhood, in any spot that the terrain allows – and the terrain sure does allow. My very first lot placement was on more of a hill than I had planned for. Building a house perpendicular to a hill wasn't my intention, but I'm not one to cower from some impractical physics. But even the prebuilt lots in *The Sims 3* are frankly pretty brave in their choice of terrain.



After using the neighbourhood editing tools to plop a few extra trees and rocks just outside my new lot, I head into build mode to find out just how over my head I'll be in a 17-year-old game. Luckily, the terrain tools for manipulating the dirt of the hill I plan to die on are largely familiar. It doesn't take me long to build a nice flat buildable space jutting out the side of my hill by using the raise terrain tool followed by the level terrain brush to create a buildable area and the soften terrain brush to make the edges of my house's eventual foundation less sharp. With all the dirt moved around to my liking, it's time to tackle a bigger project – a proper house.

Initially, I'm short on inspiration and slightly discouraged by the fewer style options available in *The Sims 3*. It does have a lot of brick wall choices, and I get further discouraged as I slap them on the walls of my rudimentary box to find that the dated, lower resolution textures don't

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2009

DEVELOPER
Maxis

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

LINK
bit.ly/3vtE1b4



ABOVE: My *Sims 3* home includes white-painted window trim and a rug I designed.

RIGHT: A landline phone? Wow, this game really is old.



look so lovely on my big, modern monitor. Until I find my favourite tool in the entire game.

KNOCK ON WOOD

Anyone who has spent time building in *The Sims 4* is certainly familiar with my greatest nemesis: wood swatches. *The Sims 4* has a frustrating fascination with wood furniture, all in different shades that never quite go together. Do you want your dining room table and chairs to match?

Don't you dare mix sets. Want to experiment with some living room furniture from a few eras? Get ready for an ugly wood grain rainbow. Don't even think about wood windows. I hope you like white, or those aren't going to match either. For all its countless options, *The Sims 4* really requires that you stick to certain combinations of objects that are meant to go together. Even after adding hundreds of new colour swatches to all sorts of decor in a

YOU CAN APPLY ANY PATTERN AND ANY COLOUR TO JUST ABOUT ANY OBJECT YOU LIKE

2021 update, *The Sims 4* annoyingly refuses to get matchy.

In complete contrast is *The Sims 3*'s greatest feature: the all powerful, much beloved, and dearly missed Create-A-Style. This handy tool includes all of *The Sims 3*'s material swatches for woods and carpet and cloth and metal, along with a colour picker to change those materials to any hue you please. You can apply any pattern and any colour to just about any object you like – whether it's windows or columns or couches or lamps. Unlike *The Sims 4*'s highly curated collection of options, *The Sims 3* just puts the entire craft box in my hands and says 'good luck'. And oh how lucky I feel! Time to sort out that matching window conundrum once and for all. I deserve to know some sort of peace.

I slap down five different windows in totally different styles and, of course, they do not have matching natural wood colour options by default. One option is

SWATCH WATCH

My new favourite patterns



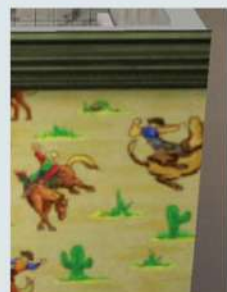
SUBWAY TILE
This look is going to be perfect for a modern kitchen backsplash. It'll be a statement about urban living.



TUFTED UPHOLSTERY
Upholstered walls? Yes, I think I will find a way to make this work. Or just put it on a sofa.



GEOMETRIC PATTERNS
My current favourite geometric pattern, which looks great with subtle, slightly different colours.



WILD WEST
This delightfully tacky print features cowboys riding bulls. I'm eager to create design crimes with this in some fashion.



RIGHT: The best part of this exterior is the matching windows and decks.

ABOVE: *The Sims 3*'s default builds go absolutely wild with terrain.

FAR LEFT: My *Sims 4* tiny house inspiration.

» slightly too orange-y, another too dark. I can't possibly get them all to play nicely together... until I open up the Create-A-Style tool, and use its magic to drag and drop the material and colour from the menu. Let me

present to you, my fellow *Sims 4* builders, with several windows in different styles, that all have matching natural wood colour. Behold their beauty and my top-notch design skills.

RUGGED

Make any rug you can imagine! Such power...



1 I've picked a nice, normal striped pattern for the outer rim of this rug – starting simple is key.

2 This pattern has three different colour channels for the outer, second, and inner stripes.

3 The interior pattern is a geometric one, with two colour channels that I matched to the exterior.

FRAME PERFECT

With the window situation handled, I really start colouring outside the lines, digging deep into *The Sims 3*'s weirdest patterns and revelling in anything unlikely I can throw them on. After discovering the majesty of creating cow print wallpaper and metallic upholstered armchairs, I decide it's time to pit *The Sims 3* against *The Sims 4* directly.

I pulled up a tiny house I recently built in *The Sims 4* and got to work copying it in *The Sims 3*. It takes me several minutes to figure out that creating a foundation and deck for the lot works differently than in the newest *Sims*, but after plotting both out, building is largely quick and familiar. Aside from the roofs. I don't want to talk about the roofs. I'll never master them in any *Sims* game.

The power of *The Sims 3*'s Create-A-Style is both in its openness and its precision. Many items, like a sofa for instance, have several slots corresponding to their parts – one for the arms and one for the cushions in this case. I can use any pattern I like in those slots and also choose a colour for them. Patterns often have multiple colour channels, even. It's a rabbit hole of design choice. To keep things tidy though, I can favourite a



material I've created, or grab the hex code colour from a piece to pick one that matches it. Not all materials wear the same colour exactly the same, so there is a little fiddling on my part to make the wood slat boards on my walls match the crown moulding above them, but the power to fuss with the colour picker until I'm happy is fully in my hands.

In all my experimenting, the wall treatments and rugs are the biggest beneficiaries of the Create-A-Style tool. Although *The Sims 3* has plenty of its own wallpaper and wall paint options, with and without trim or crown moulding or beadboard, there's so much power in changing a floral wall print to exactly the shade of blue I was looking for. As in real life, those wall colours set the personality for an entire space. Rugs, which I've never gotten on with in *The Sims*, are now one of my favourite little design puzzles.

It strikes me, as I'm picking the exact light brown shade of vaguely oak for my kitchen cabinets, that this is the point at which I should probably be stricken with choice paralysis. *The Sims 3*, through the majesty of the Create-A-Style tool, gives me an excess of options that would normally have me shutting

I'VE CREATED A CUSTOM WALLPAPER WITH A SUBTLE GEOMETRIC PATTERN

down and overwhelmed, but I am absolutely enamoured with it.

In *The Sims 4*, I lose so much time agonising over the swatches I'm given, trying to creatively mix living room furniture sets and knowing that the bar for success is just finding the combination that clashes least. In *The Sims 3*, I'm free to choose a coffee table and sofa whose silhouettes I like and then give them matching wood tones that make them look as if they definitely came from the same home store collection.

By the end of all of this, I've created a custom wallpaper with a subtle geometric pattern that I'm quite proud of, designed a dining room set in matching wood colours, and put my personal touch on the marble kitchen counters too. I created matching windows throughout the house which have natural wood on the outside and are white on the inside because it reminds me of the way that people flip houses by painting wood trim



white where I'm from. I definitely went off spec at some point, adhering to the shape of my *Sims 4* build inspiration but not necessarily its colours. Even so, the experiment is more of a success than I anticipated.

STRONG FOUNDATIONS

The Sims 3 is certainly older. Its textures are lower resolution and it has a more realist visual design that's not as charming as the stylised *Sims 4* look. But this house is so much more mine than the one I built in *The Sims 4*. I've designed nearly every piece of furniture in it exactly the way I like, not even bothered by the relative lack of silhouette choices compared to its newer sibling's catalogue. For even further choice, *The Sims 3* allows you to import new swatches and materials created by other players. It's impressively permissive, and not to a fault.

I don't think *The Sims 3* will generate the lovely screenshots I'll want to show off in build challenges with other Simmers, but I'm positive that I'll return here any time I have a specific look in mind that I know *The Sims 4* simply doesn't have the swatch options to support. Oh, and *The Sims 3* has garage bay doors. Truly, what more could I want? ■

NAT
CLAYTON

If this were an honest list, I'd have to name *Apex Legends* eight times over – once for every 100 hour milestone. There is no more Nat Clayton. There is only *Horizon*.

HOT DROP
APEX LEGENDS
ea.com/en-gb/games/apex-legends

→ *Apex Legends* is my favourite soap opera. Every team selection screen is a collaborative polycule generator, punting any three of the game's cast of gay disasters, backstabbing murderbots, and eccentric Scottish mothers into a bloodsport together and asking them to make it work.

HOW YOU DUNE?
SABLE
shed-works.co.uk/sable

→ *Sable* has fast-travel, but *Sable* is an antithesis to fast travel. If you're not travelling the spaces in between, gliding your jetbike over dunes and past calcified worms, turning off to explore shipwrecks and delving into long-lost ruins, you're robbing yourself of the entire point of *Sable*.

SPEED RUN
TRACKMANIA
trackmania.com

→ Sometimes, I get a good night's sleep. Other times I'm stuck up into the wee hours on a Discord call, lightly buzzed off some bad lager, listening to experimental Japanese rock while grinding out the Track of the Day, shaving off fractions of a millisecond per run.

NOT DEAD YET
TITANFALL 2: NORTHSTAR
github.com/R2Northstar

→ A truly absurd conspiracy of hackers, DDoS attacks and would-be saviours has rendered the base *Titanfall 2* largely unplayable. But thanks to a fan-run server browser mod, Respawn's mech shooter isn't just back – it's packed with custom servers running weird new modes.

MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Nat Clayton

FIGHT CLUB
ABSOLVER
absolvergame.com/

→ *Sifu*'s fine and all. But for my money Sloclap's debut is the superior fighter – a deckbuilding martial arts sim that has you exploring the wilds, learning moves off players and NPCs to develop your own style, before teaching it to fresh-faced newcomers.

ROLL CALL
EXO ONE
exo-one-game.com

→ Imagine a version of bowling without pins or gutters, one where the lanes are infinite expanses of extraterrestrial terror, storm-wracked and lit by the death cries of dying suns. One where you are the ball, but sometimes you're also a frisbee. That's *Exo One*.

HIKE STAKES
FAR FUTURE TOURISM
bit.ly/3BE1nfc

→ The first of Connor Sherlock's monthly walking simulator volumes, *Far Future Tourism* sets the stage for a legacy of alien, impossible landscapes at the edge of time and space – with nothing to do besides taking a stroll and soaking in the bleakness. Pure, perfect vibes.

OLLIE UP
OLLIOLLI WORLD
roll7.co.uk/olliolliworld

→ Skateparks? Boring. Sidewalks? Been there. I can go slam my face on concrete anywhere I'd like, but only this Adventure Time-esque side-scrolling skater will let me crash out in a pastel goo factory, or break my shins on the shores of an ice cream ocean.



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IT'S ALL OVER...

INTRODUCING... THE FIFTH TURTLE

Turtles in Time? More like Turtles stuck in the past! What TMNT needs is some new blood. Meet **BANKSY** – a totally poggers reptile with a fresh 2022 perspective!

STICK IT TO 'EM

His weapon of choice? The selfie stick! Watch out, Foot Clan – it'll be one neck snap for you, one insta snap for him!

CHROME DOME

Cyber brain implants allow him to calculate the perfect time to deploy his catchphrase, "Stay alert for the Turts!"

I <3 TURTLES

These glasses aren't just fashionable, they're also a symbol of his devotion to his one true love – vegan cooking!

FLAVOUR OF THE MONTH

With his super-heightened sense of smell and taste, Banksy finds living in a sewer an unbearable nightmare!

WHAT'S APP

Banksy uses his TurtlePhone™ to take cool snaps of the Turtles in action – and sells them as NFTs!

FROM SHELL

His long and complex origin story is available now, as a limited time crossover event in *Fortnite*!

...UNTIL **APRIL 28**

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